

Roman Butterfly

Betty Dahlin



KEN CHRISTIE

AN AVALON ROMANCE

ROMAN BUTTERFLY

Betty Dahlin

Florence, Italy, has exceeded all of Julie Cramer's expectations. Such a beautiful city! And now it seems Julie's years of hard work and sacrifice are about to pay off—she has been accepted at Florence's prestigious Academy of Art. She has received a generous scholarship as well, but it may not cover all her bills. So Julie decides to take a two-week job in Rome, supervising an Elderhostel group. It's a Roman holiday she will never forget.

Julie first meets Stephen Kerns on the train to Rome. She instantly feels comfortable with him, and she finds herself telling him things she's never told a soul. Afterward she is very embarrassed, but she's sure she'll never see him again. Imagine her surprise when she discovers who's going to be a tour guide for her group! The two weeks that follow are the best of Julie's life, filled with excitement, new friends . . . and love. Now that she has met Steve, she can't imagine life without him. But sometimes love requires sacrifice, and Julie may be forced to make the biggest one of all. . . .

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AVALON BOOKS

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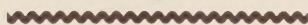
Roman Butterfly

Other Avalon Books by Betty Dahlin

LISTEN TO THE ROSES
LESSON IN LOVE

Roman Butterfly

Betty Dahlin
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AVALON BOOKS

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This one's for our children, who gave us
a chance to savor the Villa Hassler world.

Chapter One

Julie was glaring at the painting propped on the sofa when the phone rang. Her greeting was not friendly. She didn't recognize the voice on the other end. "Is Julie Cramer there, please?" he asked in English.

"This is Julie Cramer. Who's this?" She reread the paper she held in her hand, then glared again at the painting.

"My name is Paul Prince. I'm with Unity College in Rome. I talked with you when I was in Florence two weeks ago." He waited for a second, then went on. "About the director's assistant job for Elderhostel in Rome. Sorry to be so slow about calling. Been very busy. Are you still available?"

"Yes." She tried to keep her voice calm and sound businesslike.

"Well, we'd like you to come to Rome on Sunday for a two-week program." Julie opened her mouth to reply, but he went on talking. "You said, when I talked with you, that you were available immediately. Is that still true?"

"Yes, that's true," she murmured as she cradled the phone on her shoulder and pawed through the papers on her desk, looking for her copy of that application letter. In the past three weeks she'd applied for so many jobs she couldn't remember one from the other.

"Then, if you're agreeable, we'd like you to start this coming Sunday. Do you have any questions?"

"Uh . . . I don't know. I mean, yes, I do. You say this is for two weeks' work in Rome, starting tomorrow?"

"That's right. Do you want the job?" The voice on the phone sounded impatient.

"Oh, yes, I want the job. What train should I take, and where do I go when I get there?"

"Take the Florence-Rome Rapido train. Take a cab to the Casa Trilbi, at 74 Teodoro. They'll be expecting you. I'll leave instructions at the desk. Have you got that?"

"Yes, 74 Teodoro, the Casa Trilbi," she murmured, scrawling the address on the top paper in the stack.

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow evening."

She heard the click of the phone and for a second stood staring at the mouthpiece. Then she sorted through the pile of application letters. "It's in here someplace," she muttered.

Julie smiled as she pulled out the page she sought and read:

Assistant to the director of Elderhostel Program, Rome, March 16 to March 30: Applicant must be native-born English speaker, fluent in Italian, friendly. Job includes making local travel arrangements, translating for Elderhostel members, assisting members, and generally aiding the director. Applicant must be available for 24-hour residence at the Rome site, be "on call" during the full two-week period. Applicant's expenses for travel and living costs will be paid by Unity College. Salary will be paid in U.S. dollars. Applicant may be a U.S. citizen. A work permit is not required.

She exhaled loudly, a smug, relieved sound, when she finished reading.

Suddenly relief gave way to pure elation. She whirled and danced like an excited child, singing "Oh, Susannah," making up words as she sang.

*Oh, I'm goin' to Rome tomorrow,
With my sketch pad on my knee.
Got a job in Rome tomorrow—
Oh, how lucky can I be?
Oh, Julie Cramer, how lucky—*

She stopped short at the knock on the door.

As always, the sheer perfection of Ethan's face surprised her. She should have been used to it by now, but his classic features and liquid brown eyes still came as a fresh shock every time she saw him. She felt her face flush. Ethan did that to her. She wondered if he ever noticed and decided he didn't. To Ethan, she was just Chris's dowdy roommate. Mousy Julie Cramer from Iowa.

"Hi, Ethan. I'm sorry, Chris isn't here. How come you're not at the gallery?"

"Left Selmo on duty. Chris called me. She's met some Americans who want some originals from Florence to bring home as souvenirs. Met 'em in some coffee shop. She's bringing them to see her stuff at the shop and wants me to get the one she did of the Duomo. She wants them to see it along with the stuff she's got in the shop already. Said you'd know where it is."

"That's great. I'll get it for you." Julie headed for the stairway, then stopped to look back at Ethan, her face eager and excited. "Wouldn't it be great if they bought it?" she said. "Wouldn't Chris be thrilled? It would make such a difference for her. I mean. . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she made a quick, helpless gesture.

"Yeah. I hope she's not disappointed again. She—" He stopped abruptly, then went on briskly,

“Well, I should be getting back. You know which one she wants?”

“Sure. I’ll get it.”

As she went up the stairs, Julie wondered what he’d started to say about Chris, and with that came the familiar wistful question. What would it be like to look like Chris? To be the object of Ethan’s concern? To be beautiful? She shook her head wryly while she sorted through Chris’s file of neatly matted watercolors. She pulled out the *Duomo* painting and headed down the steep stairway from the studio loft. A tiny gasp escaped her when she saw Ethan.

He was standing in front of the sofa, reading the paper he held in his hand. He looked up as she appeared. “Yours?” he asked, indicating the painting she’d propped on the sofa. She nodded. He looked at the painting. Then, looking right at Julie, he said, “He’s right, you know.” Vaguely she noted her hands were shaking and wondered if it was because of what Ethan was reading or because, for the first time, Ethan was really seeing her, looking *at* her rather than through her.

“Yes, I know it. I’ve got so much to learn.”

“I don’t get it. Chris said you were studying art restoration. Aren’t you?”

“Yes. But I’m also studying painting. Restoration technique is my insurance. A way to earn a living if I can’t support myself as an artist.”

“Got any other stuff around?”

She felt a quick flush under his appraising stare and thought wryly of how often she'd wished he'd notice her. She tried to smile casually when she replied.

“Of course, tons of it.” She tilted her head toward the stairs as she spoke, and he was going up before she finished speaking. Half embarrassed, half eager, she followed him.

In the studio he went directly to her easel and studied the half-finished oil on the canvas there. Then, methodically, he picked up each of the sketches and finished paintings and looked carefully at each before replacing it in the rack.

“You're good. Really good. You know that, don't you?” The words were a statement, not a question.

Julie smiled uncertainly, wondering, as always, if it was true. Was she really good? Did she really know that?

For a long moment neither spoke. When Ethan spoke, his words came slowly, thoughtfully. “Look, would you like to show your work at the gallery? Who knows? It might even sell.”

She stared, openmouthed. “Are you serious?” He smiled as he nodded. “Did Chris put you up to this?” Her tone was wary.

“‘Course not. I told you. Chris has never said a word about your painting.”

“Right now? Today?” He merely nodded again.

“How many do you want?” She turned quickly and began sorting through her work. Then, frowning, she stood up, turned back to face Ethan. “You weren’t just kidding? You really do like my work?” She searched his face for a telltale smile.

“I really like your work. I’d like to show the acrylic I saw downstairs. The Ponte Vecchio.”

“Oh, no. Not that one. I’ve got stuff that’s better than that. Life studies, drawings. I’ll show you.” She hated the eager, almost pleading tone of her voice. She wanted to sound casual, matter-of-fact, like a pro.

Ethan gave her a sharp look. “Relax, Julie. I’m the gallery owner, not a critic. Bring the stuff you think might catch a tourist’s eye. Four or five of ’em.” As he spoke, he turned and started down the stairs. “Nothing big or heavy,” he called from the living room. “Tourists worry about carrying things.”

He was studying the acrylic when Julie reappeared, frowning, carrying the work she’d selected. “I like this. I think you ought to show it,” he told her.

“Okay. Whatever you say. But did you read the critique? ‘Inexperience is apparent . . . artist has not yet learned what to omit . . . not yet in control of the medium used.’ ” She tried, unsuccessfully, to smile as she quoted the words.

“Yeah, I read that. I also read that the work shows”—he held up the paper and read aloud—“ ‘in-

stinctive skill in composition, acute rendering of color, and talent in draftsmanship.' And I like it," he added, unfolding a big canvas portfolio and sliding pictures into its slots. "Why don't you come with me? Chris should be at the gallery by now."

Julie opened her mouth to refuse, then closed it quickly. Why not? With a grin she snatched her coat from the coatrack, threw Ethan his jacket, and opened the door.

Outside, they made their way through the narrow, marble-slab streets. Julie loved walking in Florence, strolling the same streets da Vinci and Michelangelo once trod. They moved along, down the center of the road, dodging tiny trucks and orange taxis. The bustle and clatter made conversation impossible.

On the Ponte Vecchio they threaded their way through the crowd of shoppers seeking bargains at the goldsmith shops that lined the bridge's north side. From habit Julie stopped at the Bernini statue in the center of the bridge. Almost daily, for the six months she'd been in Florence, Julie had crossed this bridge. Each time she paused in this spot. Each time she wondered if she could ever capture on canvas the subdued splendor of the view.

Below, the Arno River shone green and silver. Downriver, the Trinta Bridge seemed to float in the play of light and shadow. On the hill ahead across the bridge, the Academy Building was a somber, gray

square in the line of pink and yellow buildings. As always, her eyes lingered on the Academy Building.

Beside her, Ethan, too, looked toward it. "Getting accepted there is like being accepted on an Olympic team," he murmured.

"I know. For everyone who gets in, there are hundreds who don't make it. Wonder what. . . ." Her voice trailed away. In a quick movement Ethan pulled her around to face him, his eyes narrowed, his mouth half smiling.

"Hey—that critique was signed by Fermini! I should have figured it out! Oh, Julie—you've been accepted at the Academy!" His voice remained quiet; only the intensity of his tone made each word sound loud.

"I've been accepted. I also got this year's grant from the Foundation," she said, trying to sound casual, but failing.

Ethan stared at her. Julie felt his eyes boring into her, and a tiny shiver went through her. She smiled, thinking this day was too good to be true: first the job in Rome, then the chance to exhibit her work, then Ethan's sudden awareness of her. It was tempting fate. She couldn't be that lucky.

"When did you find out?" he asked.

"Three weeks ago."

"Does Chris know?" Ethan's tone was carefully casual.

"No. I haven't told her. Come on—she'll be waiting." She turned abruptly and strode off; he followed.

Neither spoke again until they were inside Travelers' Gallery. Ethan went directly to join Chris and the expensively dressed couple who stood talking with her.

Julie busied herself flipping through the poster bin while she watched Ethan and Chris, marveling at what a perfect couple they made. Chris's delicate blond beauty was the perfect foil for Ethan's dark, classic good looks. For the thousandth time Julie wondered again what it would be like to look like Chris, to have a face like a Botticelli angel.

While she watched, Ethan set the *Duomo* painting on a display easel. Chris made some comment, and they all laughed lightly. Then Chris said something to the couple and made a quick, helpless gesture, like a bewildered child. The couple smiled and left. Chris came to join Julie at the poster bin.

"What are you grinning about?" Chris asked.

"You." Julie smiled as she spoke. "I suspect you were not totally honest just now. You get that wide-eyed, little-girl look and make that helpless gesture when you're embroidering the facts."

"Maybe I do, but you've got that cat-with-a-warm-saucer-of-cream look on your face. What's with you?"

"I've got a job. For two weeks. In Rome. Rent money, Chris! And two weeks in Rome besides."

"You've got a job in Rome for two weeks? Doing what? Where?"

"A student aide for a bunch of old people who like to travel and learn about what they're seeing. At least I think that's what it is. I didn't ask, just said yes before he could change his mind."

"How come they picked you?"

"Who knows? Probably the one they wanted backed out. They want someone who speaks English. Maybe pure luck. Anyway, it means I can pay my half of the rent. That's the main point."

"Always assuming my half continues to come on schedule." Chris flashed a quick, fake smile.

"You still haven't told your family?" Julie asked softly.

Chris's sharp laugh had nothing merry in it. "Nope. Let's keep the allowance coming as long as possible. Right?"

"Chris, why not tell them? What's the worst that can happen? Your allowance gets cut off, right? You could still live. Ethan will let you work here without a work permit. I get by on half of what you get now. You could too."

"That's the point, Julie. You 'get by.' As long as you can buy paint and canvas, nothing else matters. For you that's enough. I'm not you." She spoke qui-

etly, pronouncing each syllable carefully, her eyes level with Julie's.

"I know that. All too well. As a matter of fact, I was just wondering what it would be like to look like you." Julie's tone was wistful, her smile rueful.

Chris was silent for a moment, her eyes narrowing slightly, her expression curious, a faint smile curving her lips. "That wasn't exactly what I meant," she said dryly. Then, in an amused tone, "So you're off to Rome for two weeks. I assume you know the good news, Ethan," she said, glancing up as he came from the back of the shop.

"Yes. Isn't it great that she's been admitted to the Academy? First person I've ever known who actually made it." He made a mock bow to Julie, then turned back to Chris. "Did you notice I moved your bell-tower landscape to the window spot?" She nodded, the smile frozen on her lovely face. Ethan gestured toward Julie. "How come you never told me about her painting?" Chris made no answer, and he continued. "I brought some of Julie's work too."

He spread Julie's sketches and paintings on the floor, and they all turned to look at them. Julie felt odd. Seeing her work spread out in a gallery for the first time was exciting, but it was also alarming. Her paintings looked bold, harsh, the colors vivid. Her sketches looked austere; she wondered if the lines weren't too sharp, too severe. She felt herself flush,

either with embarrassment or pride, or maybe both. Chris looked at her for a moment, then shrugged and smiled her little kitten smile.

Ethan turned his face to say, "Look, Chris, I was listening to you with that couple. You said you were a student. You didn't *say* you were at the Academy, but you didn't say no when she asked."

"They liked my dedicated-student bit," Chris said airily. "I do it quite well." She was silent for a moment, her lovely face taut. "That's a laugh, isn't it?" she added grimly. Julie thought how strange Chris's bitter tone sounded coming from that soft, rounded mouth.

Ethan's tone was blunt. "If they like the painting, they'll buy it. That's the bottom line, Chris. Okay? I've built up a good reputation. Dealers trust me. All it takes is one questionable deal, and it's all shot. When they come back this evening, let the painting speak for itself. No games. Okay?" Chris looked surprised, her eyes wide and childlike. He shrugged and said, "Well, I've got work to do. New artist to hang."

Chris turned to use the window as a mirror as she tied a big blue scarf around her shoulders. She tossed her mane of pale gold hair to catch the sunlight, posing like a mannequin, aware of the stares her beauty commanded. Julie stood beside her.

Chris spoke to their reflections in the window. "What about your restoration project? Have you

turned it in? You can't just leave it for two weeks, can you?"

"It's locked in the closet of my workroom. I finished the restoration. I'll turn it in when I get back." As she spoke, Julie stared at their reflections in the window and decided they looked like a scene from a period movie—the beautiful countess with her drab serving maid at her side. She wondered what Chris was thinking. What went on behind that perfect, serene facade?

"Have you known about the Academy long?" Chris sounded offhand, almost bored, and Julie felt a surge of relief at her tone.

"About three weeks."

"How come you didn't say anything?"

"I wasn't sure I could do it. The grant pays my fees and a small allowance, but not enough. With this job in Rome, I can survive—barely. Besides, I sort of worried about how you'd feel. I was scared you might resent it, feel envious. I know I would."

"Me? Envy you?" Chris sounded amused, faintly scornful. Julie glanced again at their two faces in the window and smiled ruefully. Chris's tone was thoughtful when she spoke again. "And after the two-year study period you can teach at the Institute. Earn while you paint. Then you'll be one of the people who decide on who'll be admitted to the Academy." Chris smiled briefly at their reflections, a small, secret, kittenish smile.

Chapter Two

Ethan was waiting at the terminal when Julie arrived. Too surprised to say anything, Julie looked puzzled when he smiled and took her suitcase from her. "Does Chris know you're wearing her coat?" he asked with a smile as he steered her down the long concrete aisle between trains.

"Of course she knows. It was her idea. She said I needed it in Rome. Actually she said, 'They're used to ratty, starving-artist types in Florence, but in Rome you have to have some decent clothes.' She lent me some other things too." She stopped to look at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Came to wish you bon voyage. Where are you staying?"

"A place called the Casa Trilbi. Chris has the address. Why?"

"I may pop down to Rome on business. I'll give you a call. The Casa Trilbi, right?" She nodded. "Let's see your ticket." He glanced at it and gestured grandly, to usher her up the little steps. She followed

him down the narrow aisle beside the compartments. "Here we are. Compartment B, Car 24."

"What happened with Chris's painting?" Julie asked as they stepped inside. "She didn't say anything when she came home last night. 'Course, she was busy lending me clothes. And she was still asleep when I left this morning."

"She didn't tell you?" Julie shook her head. He grinned wryly and busied himself stowing her suitcase and portfolio on the rack above the seats. "They decided against Chris's painting." His voice sounded amused but strained. When he turned to look at her, he was half smiling.

She looked down, afraid her face would betray her, reminding herself that just because Ethan had finally noticed she was alive didn't mean he was interested in her.

"Have fun in Rome, Julie." He was quiet for a moment. Then he put his hand beneath her chin, tilted her face, and said, "Keep this in mind while you're gone," and kissed her, full on the lips. For one second she resisted, thinking of Chris; then she was kissing him back, breathing in the scent of shaving cream and musk and loving it.

"I'm sorry to intrude, but the train is about to leave. Unless, of course, you're both going to Rome, in which case you really should sit down." The amused baritone voice, speaking in Italian, made

them spring apart. Julie's cheeks flamed. She felt the quick pressure of Ethan's hand.

"See you in Rome. 'Bye, Julie," he said and strode to the door. She leaned from the window to watch as he made his way back to the station. A vendor came past, selling wine. The man leaned out the other window and motioned to the vendor.

"A bottle of Frascati white, please." The baritone voice was crisp now, his Italian good. Bottle in hand, he turned around, gave her a questioning glance, pointed to the window, and said, "May I close it?" Julie nodded and sat down. The sudden silence echoed. He closed the door of the compartment, tucked the bottle into the little mesh bag by his seat, opened his briefcase, and began working.

Julie was grateful for his silence. She needed to think, to adjust to Ethan's good-bye kiss and her reaction. She'd been startled, true, but, oddly, not as surprised as she should have been. Why was that? Firmly she reminded herself that it had most likely meant nothing anyway and set herself to forget it.

Covertly, she studied the man seated across from her. He sat quietly, long legs outstretched, head bent over. She could hear the tiny scratching sound of his pen as he worked. He took up no more space than most people, yet she felt as if he filled the compartment. He seemed to emit a sort of vibrancy and electric energy that puzzled her.

Deliberately, as if he were a model in a life-study class, she studied the planes of his face, noted the hollows beneath the craggy cheekbones, the faint furrow in the forehead, the tautness of flesh beneath olive skin tones. The eyes were too deep-set to determine the color. The features were Italian, yet she felt sure he was American and wondered why. She grinned at the thought that, in Chris's clothes, she, too, "looked American."

He glanced up, caught her grin, and smiled back. When he stood up to take off his jacket, she was sure he was American; the swift, confident movement gave him away. He looked down, saw her smile, and said, "Shall I put your coat up, miss?" She handed it to him. "Do you go to Rome often?" His Italian was rapid, his accent slight but noticeable, the words clipped and sharp.

"No. This is my first visit," she answered him in English.

"Oh, you're American. I thought so." He sat down, leaned back, then said, "What are your priorities in Rome? What do you want to see first?"

"That's easy. St. Peter's. I've been studying art restoration, and I'm dying to see what they've done. At the Michelangelo house in Florence there's a model of the dome, and there's a table that has tiny replicas of each scene of the Sistine ceiling. Now I can see the

real thing.” She heard her voice babbling on and stopped suddenly.

“That’s right—they do. I’d forgotten. Do you go there often? The Michelangelo house, I mean?”

Julie liked his voice when he spoke English; he sounded friendly, interested.

“Every time I manage to get enough lira to get in. It’s probably a good thing the place isn’t free for students—like the Pitti Palace and Uffizi Museum are.”

“Why do you say that?” He looked surprised.

“This way, I have to ration myself. Keep in practice. It’s good for me.” The words came out brittle, and she stopped, surprised at her tone. He said nothing, just raised an eyebrow and looked at her expectantly.

“Well, according to legend, self-denial develops character. Good for the soul.” She spoke airily, hoping to sound sophisticated, amused.

“Why do you say that? What’s good about it?” His voice was quiet, casual.

She opened her mouth to make one of the standard, pleasant, impersonal answers she’d been making all her life. Something in his face made her stop; suddenly she was tired of pretending.

“To be honest, nothing,” she said flatly. “It’s just the way I cope with being poor.” She smiled wryly. “All the junk you hear about how poverty builds character—that’s a laugh. Being poor just makes me

as petty as my economies." He smiled and nodded. When she continued, her voice was thoughtful. "But in a way, it was true."

"What was true?"

"What I told myself when I was a kid. That if a thing was hard to get, took a lot of working for, made me think about whether it was worth the effort, I'd appreciate it more when I did get it. In some ways it really is true."

They both smiled at her defiant tone. His was an understanding, "me, too" sort of smile. She felt suddenly sure he, too, knew what it was like to be the one who gets free lunches at the school cafeteria, the one the coach buys a mitt for, the thousand ways a kid grows up knowing she's poor.

"How so?" he asked.

"Take college, for instance. If I'd been able to just go to college, study art, and then allowed to come to Florence for graduate work without all the guilt, I probably wouldn't realize how wonderful it is, how lucky I am. I'd probably just accept it." She shrugged helplessly, a little puzzled at her candor with a total stranger, then realized that was the reason. She'd never see this man again. It was safe to be honest with him. She felt his gaze, felt him studying her, and looked squarely at him. "Don't be misled. The clothes are borrowed finery. My budget doesn't run to suede coats."

"No great loss," he murmured. "Wrong color for you." He was quiet for a moment, his head tilted slightly, a faint, quizzical smile playing around his lips. Then he said, "About you . . . let me guess. You come from the Midwest—Iowa perhaps?" He gave her a questioning look, and she nodded. "Just out of college—degree in art probably, since you're studying restoration?" She smiled as she nodded this time. "And you love Florence?"

"Right on every point," she said, and he smiled in answer to her grin, his teeth very white against his tan. "Now it's my turn to guess about you."

He slid down on the seat, leaned his head back, folded his hands over his belt buckle, and waited. He looked young and self-conscious under her steady gaze.

"You're not from the Midwest, and you don't talk like an Easterner. I'll bet you're from California."

"You're right. L.A."

"You're most likely a grad student too. History, I'll bet. Writing your dissertation." He looked surprised, and Julie went on before he could reply. "But I doubt you live in Florence. More likely Rome?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. Am I right?"

"Nope. As they say about New York, Rome's a great place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there. Like you, I like Florence." He waited a minute, then

said, "You said 'guilt' about college. What did you do—fake a term paper?" She grinned at the idea. "Then the problem was economics, I gather."

"Lack of same, actually. Always worried, always scared, always guilty."

He looked surprised at the last. "Why scared? Why guilty? Of what?"

"Scared of not being any good. Guilty of ignoring others, being selfish about what I felt I had to do. As my mother said, 'I guess it's in the blood.'" She smiled as she heard herself imitate her mother's grim tone. "My father was an artist, or so Mom told me." He didn't say anything. Just looked at her and waited. "I never knew him. He left when I was around two. I'm one of the statistics. You know, 'single-parent home' bit. College was not one of the options available. I dreamed of it, just never thought it would happen to me." For a moment Julie was silent, thinking of that turbulent time when she was seventeen years old. "I didn't even dare mention studying art. My mother hated art—and artists," she said flatly.

Both were silent for a moment; then Julie said softly, "I knew how she felt. Couldn't blame her. She was right, of course." She whispered the last words, paused a second, then said flatly, "Going to college—art school—was not what she had in mind for me."

"But you did go." They both looked out the win-

dow for a few seconds. When he spoke again, his voice was thoughtful. "I can understand being scared, but why guilty?"

"Because of how I did it. The summer after I graduated from high school, the father I didn't remember died. Seems he had an insurance policy. I was his beneficiary. Some company in San Francisco sent me a check for twenty thousand dollars. In Felton, Iowa, that was enough for a down payment on a house. My mother yearned to own her own home. Instead, I went to Chicago and art school. I, as they say, 'took the money and ran.' " She meant to sound amused, but her voice trembled and spoiled the effect.

"But it was yours. That's what he would have wanted. Any father would. Why feel guilty?"

"Because of *how* I did it," she answered. "Mom had told all the people at her job about looking for a house. She was so excited. She'd spent her whole life looking after me—she'd done everything for me." She heard the catch in her voice and took a deep breath and blurted it out. "I took the money and went. Left my mother a note." For the first time in her life, Julie said the words aloud. She waited for him to say something. He didn't. He just looked at her, his head slightly tilted, his eyes steady.

"I couldn't face her. I knew if I saw her, talked to her, I'd do what she wanted, and something inside me just wouldn't let me. It's been that way all my

life—something driving me. I hate it. I wanted to make her happy, I loved her, but I *had* to go.”

The words gushed out; she paused for breath and rushed on before he could respond. “Actually, that was just the final touch. I let her down all the while I was growing up. She wanted a pretty, cheerleader type who liked parties and talking on the phone. She got a dowdy misfit who liked baseball and drawing pictures. I even look like my dad.” She smiled ruefully. “Reminded her of him. She hated that.”

They both heard the catch in her voice. When she went on, her voice was flat, matter-of-fact. “Mom was pretty. So were my cousins. I let her down there too.”

“Did she say you let her down, or is that your view?”

Julie thought a moment. “Actually, she’d say, ‘just like your father was.’ When I called her from Chicago, she said, ‘I guess it’s in the blood. Your father had some sort of demon driving him too.’ I told her I’d make it up to her someday. I never got the chance. She died a year ago. I came to Florence on her insurance money.” She tried to smile, fake a flip, ironic tone when she said the last. Instead, her mouth quivered. She sounded guilty and scared—just as she felt.

He didn’t say anything; he reached across and put his big hand over hers. It felt warm, strong, and she wanted to keep it there. Without thinking, as if it

were a thing apart from her, she watched her finger trace the vein lines from wrist to fingertips. It was as if she were mesmerized, caught by some force outside her control.

With a quick, false laugh, she snatched both her hands away and turned to look out the window. She studied the landscape rolling past outside: oddly shaped green hills with sharp gray escarpments, fields and farmyards boxed by rows of trees, sheep grazing beneath blossoming cherry trees, pink against the blue sky of Tuscany. She made herself identify each color tone, concentrated on the beauty outside, breathed deep to quiet the absurd tumult within her.

The only sound was the steady clatter of wheels beneath them. Without intending to, she turned to look at him. A shock of his hair had fallen across his forehead; beneath it, a tiny crease made a line above his eyebrows. In his eyes she could see tiny reflections of the brass lamp over her seat, like little yellow flares in a black night.

“Your eyes are yellow again,” he said casually, as if he were commenting on the weather. “They went from yellow to green, and now they’re back to yellow. Can you do it on purpose?” She shook her head. He smiled, pushed his hair back. “Makes it hard to conceal a change of mood, I imagine,” he said, “or do many people notice when your eyes change color?” She shook her head again. He looked mildly sur-

prised, then grinned, reached for the wine bottle, and announced, "I propose a toast."

He pulled out a Swiss army knife, opened the corkscrew blade, and pointed to the tiny paper cups in their holder by the window. "Now, if I can just make this darn thing work," he muttered while she held the cups ready. He looked absurdly smug at the loud pop of the cork. "To Rome," he said grandly.

Their eyes met as they raised the cups to their lips. She felt a surge of pure happiness. Before they could drink, the door opened, and the conductor appeared. He studied the pair for a second, then, without a word, reached and pulled out a third cup with one hand and punched their tickets with the other. He winked at them, said, "To friends," drank, and was gone.

And suddenly they *were* friends. They talked. They argued over music and favorite spots in Florence. Both admitted feeling guilty over falling asleep during operas and enjoying schmaltzy movies. He told her of a favorite uncle who took him to ball games, and she told him of old Mr. Correlli who lived across the hall and taught her Italian and gave her a second-hand easel. Oddly, they never mentioned art or artists. They disputed happily about baseball teams and favorite players. She boasted of pitching for Bobby Sox League, and he lamented his hopeless ineptitude at sports.

“Actually,” he said, “it’s because of baseball that I got into research.” She looked bewildered, and he made a quick, silencing gesture before she could question him. “The rules said they had to take me in Little League—even let me play. But in school or at the park when the guys chose up teams, they’d say, ‘We had him last time. You guys are stuck this time.’ I took to hiding out in the school library. By the time I got to college, I realized I liked research better than baseball.” He paused for a moment, his face broke into a broad grin, and he added, “Of course, I’m not totally cured. I still have fantasies. For instance, I picture heaven.”

She looked puzzled. He stood up and said, “I’ll know I’m in heaven when a high fly ball is hit out to me in right field and I reach up and catch it with one hand.”

When he said this, he leaped up and caught an imaginary ball, and she jumped up to clap and cheer. At that moment the conductor poked his head in. He murmured, “Rome in two minutes,” looked from one to the other, and muttered “Americans!” under his breath as he closed the door.

Their laughter made a happy little echo in the tiny room. With a joyous whoop, he swung an imaginary bat at a nonexistent ball, and she shouted, “It’s a grand-slam home run!” They sank to their seats,

weak with laughter, as the train roared through the tunnel and into Rome.

He held her coat, picked up her suitcase along with his own, followed her down the aisle, and put out his hand to help her down the steps onto the concrete corridor between trains.

She stared at the scene before her. Vendors hawked food and souvenirs and magazines, shouting their wares. Children ran, eluding their screaming parents. A loudspeaker roared, but words blurred in the cavernous space. Watery green sunlight filtered through the glass roof overhead, making faces look eerie and pale.

“Come on, Rome is waiting,” he said, pushing a path through clusters of people. Julie followed in his wake like an obedient child, admiring his courtesy while he opened a trail through the jostling mob. Inside the terminal he paused to wait for her. “Why are you grinning?” he asked.

“Because you remind me of a well-mannered lineman on a football team, making room for the quarterback but saying, ‘Excuse me, please’ while he’s doing it.”

“Maybe if you’d been the quarterback, I might have made the team. Come on, I’ll flag down a cab.” He gestured toward the line of waiting cabs and handed her suitcase to the driver. Julie turned to face him before she climbed in. “Wait—I just realized—

I don't even know your name," he shouted over the din of horns and voices.

She started to tell him her name and where she'd be staying, then stopped. This man knew too much about her. She'd said too much. They'd both be embarrassed.

" 'Bye, and thank you. Thank you very much," she said, speaking softly beneath the noise. His face looked odd, faintly wistful, almost sad, his eyes dark slits above the angular cheekbones.

He stared at her for a moment, then gave her a wry half smile. "Enjoy your stay. And tell your boyfriend he's a lucky guy."

She started to protest that Ethan was not her boyfriend, but the cab behind them blew its horn, and he barely had time to close the door before her cab was moving. She glanced back to where he stood, his hand upraised to wave. She thought of the touch of that hand on hers and felt her face flush, remembering her reaction to it.

Good thing I won't ever see him again, she mused. I said things to him I've never admitted before. I never believed those stories about people baring their souls to total strangers on a train. Funny how good it felt. She smiled. Good thing he doesn't know who I am. It would be humiliating to meet him again. Then she sighed faintly and added, But I wish I would.

Chapter Three

Rome! Julie leaned against the window of the cab like a kid at a candy store.

The city pulsed with energy. Unlike the misty grays and greens and subdued splendor of Florence, Rome was all golds and browns and bustling vitality. The ancient Roman bricks glowed orange in the late-afternoon sun. A horse-drawn carriage rolled along ahead of them, its driver gesturing with nonchalant arrogance while a huge bus loomed up and passed within inches of his sweaty horse. Julie gasped and the driver laughed.

Pedestrians darted in and out between cars, walking swiftly, full of self-importance, as though they were sure they were at the center of the universe. She wanted to jump out and stride among them, wanted to bustle along the crowded walks, be part of the city's excitement. Julie felt intoxicated by the city.

They rounded a corner and drove past a huge oval of green lawn. At one end kids were playing soccer; at the other a baseball game was in progress; joggers trotted around the rim. "Circus Maximus," the

driver said casually as he dodged a zooming Fiat, rounded a corner, and stopped smoothly in front of 74 Teodoro, the Casa Trilbi. She paid him and stood on the curb staring at the huge, oddly familiar ruins outlined against the amazing blue of the Roman sky.

"Palatine Hill," he murmured, gesturing in that direction as he drove off.

Upstairs, in her room, Julie flung open the wooden casements and opened the window. In the courtyard below calla lilies and geraniums and petunias grew in tidy rows beside neat gravel walks. A pigeon-stained statue of St. Francis presided over the square, and birds flew between the trees, apparently unaware that they were in the middle of a huge city.

She unpacked quickly, grateful to Chris for the suit and skirt as well as the expensive suede coat. *In Chris's wardrobe I'll look prosperous and professional*, Julie told her reflection in the closet-door mirror. *The problem will be living up to the image*, she added grimly as she picked up the mimeographed pages and looked at the schedule for Sunday. It read:

6:30 P.M. *Instructors and assistant assemble in lounge.*

AGENDA

1. *Introduce staff*
2. *Outline program*
3. *Questions, problems, responsibilities*

Julie glanced at her watch. Only two-thirty. She had four hours. She snatched up her purse, flung the suede coat over her shoulders, and ran down the stairs, too eager to wait for the elevator.

“Don’t try to see St. Peter’s on a Sunday afternoon. It’ll be jammed with tour-bus people,” the lady at the desk said when Julie asked for directions.

She felt oddly relieved by the advice, knowing she was too eager and excited to concentrate and appreciate.

There’s a wonderful excitement about exploring a famous city; everything is new and yet familiar from hundreds of pictures. Julie strolled beside the Tiber River, crossed the same bridge Roman soldiers trod when they set forth to conquer the world; she wandered old streets, felt smug when she found some spot listed on her map, giggled when she couldn’t, and lost track of time. A sudden gust of cold wind made it clear that the warm afternoon sun was fading and she’d better find her way back to the Casa Trilbi.

She was climbing the steps of the Capitoline Hill, the steps Michelangelo designed so many years ago, lost in wonder at the genius of the artist she revered. Julie didn’t see the woman fall. She just felt a thump when the woman’s shoulder bumped her, and she looked down to see the woman crumpled on the step, her face buried in the folds of a fur coat, her white hair blowing in pathetic little wisps.

Julie knelt and pulled back the soft fur to find the pulse beneath the ear. The face was gray, the eyes wide and staring. The woman blinked and stirred. Julie said, "I don't know if you should move. You may have broken something." Without thinking, Julie had spoken in English. Now, in Italian, she turned and shouted, "Get back, give her air. Is anyone here a doctor or a nurse?" she asked more quietly. No one stepped forward, and Julie turned back to the woman.

While Julie spoke, the woman sat up, looking bewildered, blinking her eyes and making little gestures with her hands toward the people who had gathered around.

"I'm okay," she murmured weakly. "Will you tell them to go away? I feel so foolish."

Julie sat down, pulling the white head against her shoulder, and the onlookers drifted away. For a few minutes they just sat there while the sun slid down behind the hills of Rome and the sharp wind blew cold and biting. "I'm feeling better now," the woman said as she pulled herself erect.

Julie put her hand under her elbow to support her, and she felt the woman trembling with effort.

"Lean on me," she told her. "When we get to the bottom, there are some benches you can sit on while I get you a cab. Are you alone?"

The woman nodded.

Slowly they made their way down the wide, sloping steps and over to the benches. "Where do you want to go?" Julie asked, turning toward the street.

"The Villa Hassler," was the weak reply.

Julie commandeered a taxi and bullied the driver into waiting while she went to fetch the woman. Vaguely she noted that this was the first time in her life she'd acted pushy. Back at the bench, the woman put out both hands, tried to rise, and slumped in Julie's arms. She dragged the woman to the cab and told the driver to take them to the nearest hospital.

The woman spoke up as they were lifting her onto the backseat. "Please, no hospital." Her voice was faint but determined. "Take me to the Villa Hassler. They'll get me a doctor."

The driver looked questioningly at Julie.

"Take us to the Villa Hassler, whatever that is," she said in a resigned tone.

The Villa Hassler was another world. A world Julie had seen in movies or on TV, with polished marble floors beneath oriental rugs and heirloom tables. A pair of uniformed doormen had the cab door open before she could reach for it. The woman pulled herself erect and told them, "Please pay the cab driver for me and have someone get my key for me. I am not feeling well." Then she turned to Julie. "I'll be quite all right now, thank you." She pronounced each word carefully, but her voice quavered.

"No, I'll help you to your room," Julie said briskly. Her answer surprised her. She climbed out, took the woman's arm, and led her into the huge lobby.

A man wearing a morning coat rushed over. "She fainted," Julie told him. "Please help me get her to her room. And call a doctor."

The man nodded, made an imperious gesture. They were ushered to the elevator, escorted down halls, and led through a sitting room to a huge, softly lit bedroom.

"I'll stay with her until the doctor arrives," Julie heard herself say. Vaguely she wondered why she'd said that. She hadn't intended to.

The man left, and Julie helped the woman take off her coat and shoes and then helped her onto the bed. The woman lay there, a faint smile on her face, watching as Julie hung the coat in a closet. "Are you always so bossy?" she asked.

Julie grinned, pleased at the amused tone. "Only when I can get away with it. Do you often faint on stairways?"

"Only when I can get away with it. Never did it before. Don't recommend it." She paused a moment, studying Julie, then went on. "I'm indebted. Thank you. Thank you very much."

Julie shrugged, then smiled, suddenly embarrassed and shy.

The woman patted the bed, and Julie sat down be-

side her. "I'm Nora Hedinger. What's your name? You're obviously an American. Are you staying here at the Hassler too?"

The idea of staying at a place like this made Julie giggle. "No. I'm not staying here. My name is Julie Cramer. I'm a student. This is my first day in Rome." The telephone rang; Julie picked it up and handed it to the woman, who spoke rapidly, her voice surprisingly strong.

"Yes, send him up right away. And will you have a car ready for my young friend, please?" She handed Julie the phone. "That was the concierge. He's sending up a doctor. I took the liberty of ordering you a car. I hope that was all right. Where are you staying?"

"The Casa Trilbi," she responded automatically, smiling as she mentally compared her Spartan little room with its narrow bed and tile floor with the splendor of this room. She was still grinning when she opened the door to admit the doctor.

"She's in here," Julie said in Italian. "Do you speak English?" He nodded and followed her to the bedroom. She moved quickly to where the woman lay and said, "I'll leave you now. Bet you'll be fine by tomorrow." Without thinking, she reached for the veined old hand and squeezed it gently.

When she turned to leave, the doctor said, "Miss, please leave your name and phone number at the

desk. I'll need to speak with you about what happened. I'll have my nurse call you." Julie nodded, smiled her good-bye, and left.

In the lobby the man in the morning coat carefully noted her name and address. He didn't actually sneer as he wrote "Casa Trilbi," merely sniffed. He guided Julie to a long black car and told the driver, "Take Mrs. Hedinger's guest wherever she wishes to go. Then return. Mrs. Hedinger may need you later."

Julie leaned back against the cushions as the car purred through Rome. She tried to feel ashamed of enjoying such luxury at the cost of a nice old lady fainting, but couldn't. She savored every second. Traffic eddied and flowed outside, and all too quickly they made the sharp turn onto Via Teodoro. The driver leaped out to open the door and waited until she went inside.

"Ah, yes, Miss Cramer. The others are all here. In the lounge. Through that door." The lady at the desk pointed to a door behind Julie's back and turned to answer the phone. Julie glanced at the clock above the desk. It read six thirty-five. She took a deep breath, pushed her hair back, opened the door gently, and went in.

A round, pink-cheeked man wearing gold-rimmed glasses came forward, his hand outstretched. "You must be Julie Cramer. I'm Paul Prince. Come in. We're just getting started. This is Hannah Greene.

She'll be teaching the modern politics course." He gestured toward a tall, square woman with short, wiry hair and a thousand-watt smile. "And behind you is Stephen Kerns, who'll be teaching the class on Renaissance art."

She felt an absurd tremor when she heard the baritone voice. "We've already met, Paul. We're fellow Florentines."

Julie whirled around to find herself face-to-face with the tall man from Compartment B of the Florence-Rome Rapido train.

Chapter Four

The itemized list on the “Schedule for Sunday” should have given Julie a clue. Paul Prince was organized; he zipped through instructions and answered questions with brisk three-word answers. By seven-thirty he was closing his briefcase, talking as he did so. “Both Hannah and I live here in Rome, so we’ll be on our way now.” He paused to look up and then said, “Steve, Marianne told me to bring you home for dinner after the meeting. She’s eager to see you again. The kids too. Available?”

Julie didn’t wait to hear his answer; she got her key and made her way up the stairs, wondering how it felt to have people “eager to see” you. Her room was cold; she’d left the window open, and the chill March wind blew the white curtains into the dark room like fluttering banners. She flipped on the light and rushed to close the window.

The neat, tiny room, with its tan walls and beige bedspread, looked forlorn beneath the unforgiving glare of the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. A brown crucifix above the bed was the only decoration,

mute evidence that Casa Trilbi was once a nunnery, this room a nun's cell. She wondered how many novices had stood here, silent and lonely, as she was now. "I must need food. Self-pity is a sure sign of hunger." Deliberately, she spoke aloud to break the stillness; her voice sounded odd.

So did the knock on the door. Stephen Kerns looked huge there in the hallway; his shadow made a long black blob on the wall behind him, and his white shirt made a gleaming triangle on his chest. "Got any plans for dinner?" She looked blank, shook her head. "I'd have phoned," he went on, "but there are no room phones." She nodded. "Look, say something, will you?" Before she could speak, he added, "Like, 'Yes, I'll have dinner with you, Steve.' "

"What about Mr. Prince—Paul?" She corrected herself quickly; it felt awkward to refer to an instructor by his first name.

"Told him you and I had made a date on the train, before we knew we'd be working together. Be a shame to make a liar out of me." Steve grinned as he said the last, his face suddenly boyish. She smiled back and started to speak, but he said, "Good. Meet you downstairs in twenty minutes. Any special place you want to go?" She smiled again and shook her head. "Okay, see you downstairs." He started down the long corridor, then turned, flashed his wide smile, and called, "Don't dawdle, lady. I'm starving."

She didn't. As she raced through shower and makeup she heard herself whistling and wondered if the noise was blasphemous. The idea of little Julie Cramer being bold enough to do something blasphemous made her giggle, and, on a hasty impulse, she swept her thick mop of hair into a big knot at the back of her head and anchored it there. "I look like a kid playing dress-up," she murmured, but she smiled as she spoke, pleased with the effect.

Steve's expression when she came down pleased her too. He didn't say anything, just took her hand and hustled her into a waiting cab. "Know what today's date is?" he asked when they were inside.

"March fifteenth. Why?"

"Got someplace special you want to eat—first night in Rome and all that—or want to trust me?" As he spoke, a tiny Fiat whipped past; its driver waved and smiled as she evaded their cab's fender by inches. Julie leaned back, closed her eyes, and murmured that she didn't care where they ate, just hoped they'd be alive to do it. She heard his chuckle, but didn't open her eyes until she heard Steve say to the cabbie, "Okay, let us out here."

He took her hand and led her down an alley behind a theater. The walls were covered by garish posters advertising old movies, and low-wattage light bulbs hung over doorways. The one above the restaurant was slightly brighter, and the door looked newer.

They stepped inside and made their way down three steep flights of stairs.

The restaurant was a long, narrow, red-carpeted room barely wide enough for tables on either wall and an aisle between them. The waiter led them to the far end to a table by a railed-off portion of the room, where a spotlight shone on bare stones and a metal marker covered with words that were unreadable in the glare. Lovely smells of pasta and garlic and fresh bread filled the air, and the starched napkins felt crisp in Julie's hand.

They ordered; they ate crusty bread and sipped red wine, enjoying the gentle buzz of voices around them and the subdued charm of this cellar restaurant.

"Today's March fifteenth, right? Also known as the Ides of March, right?" Steve smiled at her nods. "That's why we're here." She gave him a blank look. "See that spot behind me—with the spotlight?" Julie looked at it and then at him. "That's where Caesar was stabbed on this day a long time ago. Legend has it he was standing where the marker is now. Seemed only fitting to come pay our respects today, don't you think?"

"Here? In a restaurant? You're kidding, aren't you?"

"Nope. 'Course, it wasn't a restaurant then, just a part of Pompey's palace. By law today, as an antiquity, it has to be accessible to the public. The waiters

are never sure if people want to eat or sightsee. Wonder what old Julius would think about it. Think he'd like the attention?"

"As long as it was admiring." She felt odd. Suddenly ancient history was not just words on a page. Suddenly Julius Caesar and Mark Antony and Brutus were not just names. "How could they do it?" she said thoughtfully. "And why? Would politics be enough to make a man decide to take a knife and hack up another person? Why do you think they did it?"

He took a bite, chewed for a minute, and sipped his wine before he replied. "Probably envy." He took another sip and tilted his head back. When he went on, his voice was thoughtful. "I mean . . . here's this over-the-hill general with a hearing problem and very little hair who has epileptic seizures. They've known him for years, warts and all. Now it looks as if he's going to be emperor, and they start thinking: 'Why him? What makes him so special? Why not me?'"

"Envy is a powerful motivator. For instance, I've seen faculty members stab each other in the back, figuratively speaking, out of envy. And the funny thing is, it's not just individuals. The schools themselves are jealous about talent they attract."

"Oh, come off it! There are ten applicants for every opening at good schools. Look how many apply at the Academy and how few get accepted."

“True. And that’s because Florence is known as the best, right?”

She nodded, a small, complacent smile on her lips, thinking of how pleased he’d be when she told him of her acceptance.

“Well, the guys at the Venice Academy are envious, jealous really, of that reputation. They cut each other’s throats today, too, only now they use money and grants to do it. You’d think they were drafting players for a major-league team.”

“Did they want you to come to Venice?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact they did. But they wanted me to stick to medieval art. I want to do research in Etruscan art, and Florence is really the only place for that field.” Suddenly he grinned, made a quick dismissive gesture, and said, “But enough of past envy and discontent. Tell me about your day. Did you get to St. Peter’s?”

She told him of her wanderings and of the lady on the Michelangelo steps and her brief venture into the elegant hotel. He asked the woman’s name, and when Julie told him, he said he’d heard it somewhere. A boy came through, selling flowers. Steve selected one, a yellow rose, its color so deep it was nearly bronze. “Matches your eyes,” he said, handing it to Julie.

Their hands met across the table. She looked down at them. His were big, with strong, bony fingers and fiercely clean nails. Hers were sturdy, square, with

traces of paint ground into the knuckles. His were the hands of an aristocrat, hers those of a stonemason—or a painter. She felt the same electric pulse she'd felt on the train, but this time she didn't pull her hand away.

For a few seconds they just sat there, eyes locked, hands joined. Then the waiter came to remove the plates, and Steve leaned back and closed his eyes. The harsh glare of the spotlight fell on his face, making it gaunt. *He'll look like that when he's old*, she thought. *His hair will be white, and he'll have deep crevices, and I'll sketch his face when he's dozing.*

For one terrible second she thought she'd said the words aloud. He opened his eyes, leaned forward, raised his glass, and said, "I propose a toast. To the Ides of March. They didn't do too well for Caesar—but they brought us together today." They clinked the glasses, and suddenly the kinship they'd felt on the train was back. They talked, and they laughed, and he spilled veal scaloppine on his shirt, and the world seemed aglow with happiness.

Outside, they found that the wind had died and a faint, milky fog lay over the city. Both were subdued by the ancient splendor of the city's fog-shrouded streets. Then he said, "Now close your eyes. Don't cheat."

Julie shut her eyes and felt his arm around her

waist. Carefully and gently he guided her. Their footsteps made soft, clapping noises on old cobblestones.

He stopped, and when he took his arm away, she felt cold. "Okay. Now you can open them."

The ancient columns seemed to float in the mist, the old brick washed white by spotlights. Seen through the fog, they didn't look like ruins; they looked whole and perfect, as if some toga-wearing Roman should be strutting proudly between them. Julie felt hushed, the way she'd felt when she'd stood in a great forest, as if words would shatter the splendor.

Wordless, they moved down the path and up the steep, broken steps to the ancient platform. Lights from passing cars made wavy, white streaks in the background, the sounds muted by fog. They stood silent, both reluctant to speak, lest their voice shatter the spell. Then he said quietly, "I imagine Mark Antony stood just about where you are when he made his speech."

Instinctively Julie stepped back, and he smiled and pointed to the rubble-strewn ground in front of the platform. "Probably had the funeral pyre right about there." She looked down at the rubble-strewn ground and shuddered. In her imagination she pictured the flames of the funeral pyre and heard the shouts of the people raging for vengeance.

"You're cold," he said, his voice thick and husky.

She shook her head and, without thinking, moved into the circle of his arms. The soft wool of his jacket felt smooth against her cheek, and when she lifted her face, she knew his lips would be waiting for hers. For seconds—or eternity—they were the only people in the world, sealed tight, their lips and bodies molded together while the damp Roman fog swirled around them and the ancient columns cast wavery shadows below them.

They stared at each other when they pulled themselves apart, both too shaken to speak. She put her hand in his, and they walked, silent and trembling, up the hill and across the old plaza. They paused to gaze at the floodlit Colosseum looming huge and hazy on the horizon. He pulled her close, and again their kiss swept them up in some wondrous, private world. When he finally spoke, his voice was odd, almost fearful. “Julie, I—” He was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was flat. “What about the guy on the train? This happen with him too?”

Her laughter made him jump. “Ethan’s not my boyfriend. He’s my roommate’s. To Ethan I’m just Chris’s mousy roommate. We’re friends.”

“Do you kiss all your friends that way?”

She laughed again; then she saw his expression and suddenly was serious. “Steve, this morning’s good-bye was a fluke. It didn’t mean anything. Least of all to Ethan.” He gave her a strange look, and she

laughed. He looked hurt and puzzled, and she tried to stop laughing long enough to explain. "It's just that it seems so typical for me. I mooned over Ethan like a sick calf. He never even noticed. When he finally did, it had to be this morning—when you came. How's that for timing?"

She was quiet for a minute. "Does it really make a difference?" She reached up, ran her finger across his forehead and over the wiry brush of his eyebrows, as if she were learning his face, committing it to memory. "Do we have to talk about him now?" she asked softly.

"No, we don't have to talk about him." He pulled her close, and she nestled snug against him to watch the sudden wind blow away the fog and clouds. As if by magic the sky was clear. At the same moment the spotlights on the Colosseum went out, and only a faint, ivory form gleamed in the moonlight, as vague and enchanted as a child's dream. She trembled at the perfection, and he held her tight.

They walked on empty streets, climbed the steps to cut through the churchyard and down the side street to the Casa Trilbi. It felt so right to stroll beside him, his arm around her shoulders, her arms around his waist, as though they'd been designed to fit together.

Only one dim light, in the hall, lit the Casa Trilbi. At her door he said, "I'll have a hard time keeping

my mind on lectures, knowing you're around the place."

She brushed a quick kiss across his lips before she answered. "It'll be even harder next semester when I'm one of your students."

"What do you mean? I'm at the Academy. You're at the Institute."

"I was, but I've been accepted at the Academy. I wasn't sure I could manage it, but now I know I'll find some way. Won't it be wonderful? Think of it!" She couldn't see his face in the dark hall, and she smiled when he gasped, then pulled his head down for a last kiss and was inside her room before he could reply.

Moonlight poured through the window, making a neat, white rectangle on the shiny floor tiles. She stepped forward into the space and stood there hugging herself, so awash with happiness she wanted to shout.

That was when she heard it. From the little courtyard below came the song of a nightingale. Its soaring notes filled the room, and while it sang, she felt as if she, too, soared. As if that bird were giving voice to all the joy that surged inside her.

Chapter Five

“**S**ee you at the airport at four. Grab a bunch of luggage carts if you get there before me,” Paul said before he hung up.

Julie assured him she'd be on time, hung up the phone, and checked her list of jobs for the morning. It was long. She assembled information packets for the Elderhostelers, checked with the chef about meal-times and menus, made sure all the rooms were ready. She raced around, carrying a clipboard, too busy to worry about whether she looked efficient.

Paul told her Steve was at Rome's Unity College, getting slides he wanted, and would be there all day. She was disappointed but relieved; she needed time to adjust, get some perspective on what had happened to her last night. Still, she felt let down. Why hadn't Steve come by to say good morning—left a note or something?

Air Italia's Flight 108 was almost on time. Three couples appeared and made their way to where Julie and Paul stood beside their ELDERHOSTEL GROUP sign in the terminal. One pair looked like characters

in an old spy movie. The wife wore an ankle-length maroon cape and high-heeled maroon leather boots. The husband had a trench coat thrown over his shoulders and wore a wide-brimmed black hat, like some sinister foreign agent in a spy film. They were laughing and talking with the other four as they approached. The other two couples wore sensible shoes and wrinkled slacks.

The cape lady greeted Paul with a wave. "We're the only ones with only carry-on luggage. Goodness knows when the rest will get sprung. Does this happen often?" she asked.

"Yes, it's part of the local color," Paul replied with a smile. "After a while you get used to it."

Julie nodded. After almost a year in Italy she was used to sudden wildcat strikes to protest one thing or another. She never did find out what the baggage handlers were protesting that Monday, just knew that they had walked off the job for twelve hours, leaving the managers to unload planes and forcing most passengers to wait hours to get their bags and more hours to go through customs.

One of the sensible-shoes men spoke up. "Can we just grab a cab and go to the hotel, or must we wait for the whole group?" His face sagged with weariness; Julie could see the tired lines in all their faces.

"Paul, why don't you take these people in your van? I'll wait here and come with the rest later. No

sense in all of us waiting here.” Julie was astonished when she heard herself. She sounded crisp and competent.

They left. Julie pulled out charcoal and sketch pad from her bag and settled down beside the big sign. There were wonderful faces—round matrons dozing amid bundles, vulnerable yet wary, even in sleep. A small boy with fiercely blue eyes stamped his feet and pounded his mother in wild, wonderful, impotent rage, his round, pink mouth distorted with fury. Julie sketched frantically to catch his anger before it subsided.

Gradually, in straggling pairs and weary four-somes, the rest of the group assembled. All looked weary, their faces saggy with jet lag and resignation. Oddly, few complained; those who did subsided quickly under the harsh glares of fellow travelers. Julie checked names off the list and helped pile luggage onto carts and into vans and sent them off in groups of eight. Finally, at ten-thirty, she checked off the last name and joined the last group in the van.

At the Casa Trilbi she located extra reading lamps for one lady, changed room locations for two couples, retyped and Xeroxed the revised schedule for tomorrow according to notes Paul had left, and stumbled into bed sometime after midnight. Perhaps the nightingale sang that night too. Julie slept too soundly to hear.

The cape lady from the airport yesterday spotted Julie and beckoned her to the empty chair at her table when she came down to breakfast. Even without the cape, the lady looked exotic. Julie decided it was because of the way her hair was pulled so tight across her head; she looked as if her scalp had been painted black. Without the hat and trench coat, the husband was just another benign old man with thick glasses. Across the room Steve and three of the group were busy with conversation and food. Julie stared at his back, but he didn't look up.

After eating, everyone stood to introduce himself. A delicious tingle went down Julie's spine when Steve stood up. When it was her turn, she looked straight at him at first, but then she could feel her cheeks flaming red, and she looked away quickly.

Elderhostelers were not what Julie had expected. Not her idea of old people. They'd been everywhere. One man, who had to be over seventy, told of going to Tibet and Nepal last year; he sounded annoyed because he hadn't been able to climb Mt. Everest. Julie wondered how they'd react to someone as young as she; she hoped they'd accept her.

When the last one sat down, the cape lady put down her cup and turned to Julie. Her face was furrowed with age. "Call me Lilianne. I hate my last name. Paul says you're the Elderhostel version of camp counselor. Or did he say Mother Superior?"

Julie blushed and everyone laughed. She laughed too, but that's what she was.

She was too busy doing her job to notice she was good at it. She made phone calls in Italian, got prescriptions filled, found an optometrist, typed schedules, got cameras repaired, haggled with bus companies for excursions, mapped out routes for walking tours. She loved it.

And she loved being everyone's granddaughter. They teased her, told her of their families, offered her vitamins, and asked endless questions. One morning while she was coming down the stairs, she heard her name and stopped to eavesdrop. "That Julie could take over the White House. I don't think there's anything she can't manage." Glen Anderson looked up, caught her eavesdropping, smiled, and said, "It's true, Julie. You do a terrific job."

It was heady stuff. She loved it.

Steve, too, was busy; he and Hannah worked out class schedules, lectured, planned field trips, and ran discussion groups at night. Paul led walking tours; they prowled ruins, cathedrals, museums; they explored archaeological digs and climbed hundreds of steps. Paul strode along at the head of his troops, his round face even pinker in the brisk March wind, halting at each corner while others trotted to catch up. He guided the group through St. Peter's Square and advised them to come back alone to explore the won-

ders of the Vatican Museum and the grandeur of St. Peter's and allow themselves hours for each. Julie wondered wryly when she'd manage that.

She was late getting to lunch on Thursday, and the others were nearly finished when she sat down. Lili-anne gestured across the table and went straight to the point. "Elinor wants you to find her a good hair-dresser. Wants an appointment this afternoon—needs a dye job. She wants someone to go with her, to speak Italian. Can you go? If you can't, do you know someone who could?"

"I'll be glad to go with you. I'll call right away," Julie told Elinor.

"Thanks. I need the works. Nails, face, hair, feet. I haven't felt so scraggly since I went white-water rafting with my teenage grandsons. I need to be cherished. Refurbished." Elinor's slow drawl and soft voice ran the words together. Her face was round and smooth, almost unlined. Julie tried to picture this serene woman bouncing over rapids in a rubber raft. She failed.

Elinor Sturgeon didn't need Julie. At the beauty shop she produced a card with the exact color and brand of hair dye she wanted; on its back was a diagram showing exactly how it was to be set. In a beauty shop Elinor was as helpless as a piranha. She sat, encased in a plastic cape, and stared at the mirror in front of her while Julie stood beside her.

"You remind me of my daughter-in-law," Elinor said softly. She was quiet for a second, then went on. "Actually, my ex-daughter-in-law. I don't get to see her anymore since the divorce. I really miss her." Julie murmured something about being sorry, and Elinor brushed her words away with a quick gesture. Her next words surprised Julie. "Would you do me a great favor?"

"Of course, if I can." Julie wondered what in the world she could do for this self-assured lady with the lovely, lazy voice.

"Would you allow me to redo you?"

Julie's bewilderment showed on her face.

"I run a beauty shop in Westwood. I'm good at my trade. I cater to fifty-plus matrons with saggy chins. They pay me very well, and I'm glad for their money. That's business. This would be pleasure. An unlined, fresh face. It would be a joy."

She motioned Julie to the little stool beside her, tilted Julie's face back, and lifted the heavy mop of hair, humming a tuneless little song while she studied the young face before her. Oddly, Julie wasn't embarrassed; it was like class when they studied the model before starting the sketch.

She looked in the mirror, too, studied her own face, noted the planes, checked the color tones—blondish-brown hair pulled back from a high forehead, roundish cheeks with no hollows, a short, freckled nose;

yellow eyes with amber specks, thick brown lashes, heavy brows, child's mouth, rounded chin. She decided she would paint her face as "best friend of the heroine" or "girl next door," nice but dull.

"Would you let me?" Elinor's words broke into Julie's reverie. "I mean, will you translate what I tell them to do?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't afford this place."

"Oh. Of course not. Please, let me. As a favor? Because you remind me so much of Jennie. Please." Her eyes met Julie's in the mirror; Elinor's were shiny with tears. Julie looked away and agreed quickly.

Elinor didn't really need anyone to translate. She and the owner of the shop seemed to communicate with hand signs. Julie closed her eyes while they chopped away at her hair, yelped in pain when they plucked her eyebrows, felt pure panic when they applied hair dye. Every so often Elinor asked how to say something in Italian, but for the most part the two women reminded Julie of a pair of trainers getting a puppy ready for a dog show. Elinor pointed and gestured; the owner nodded or shook her head. Then they smiled smugly. The manicurist sniffed when Julie refused to have long, fake nails put on.

While Elinor was being rinsed and curried and polished and massaged, she kept the people in the shop bustling over Julie, following directions she issued in English for Julie to translate into Italian. Julie closed

her eyes to wallow in pleasure while her hair was brushed and patted and blow-dried; vaguely she missed the solid weight of her long mop. They turned her around, her back to the mirror while they worked on her face, and Julie laughed softly at the way the owner held her tongue between her lips while she applied blush and eyeliner.

When they whipped off the plastic cape and whirled the chair around, Julie gasped. A bronze-haloed pixie with amazing eyes stared back at her. "Whatever you do, never cover up those freckles. They're the perfect touch," Elinor instructed, sounding smug and happy.

Julie was too stunned to reply. The girl in the mirror was no "best friend of the heroine"; she was the mischievous imp to whom zany things happen, the one who has merry adventures in improbable places. She felt both elated and terrified.

The owner pressed a card into Julie's hand and told her, "This is the color mixture and the brand name for your hair. The makeup is all boxed and ready for you at the desk." She steered Julie to the front of the shop to wait for Elinor.

Once there, Julie tried to read the slick Italian magazine, but she couldn't stop looking at herself in the mirrored wall. Could that person in the expensive suede coat with the burnished curls and impudent face be mousy Julie Cramer?

“Here, I spotted this at the gift counter while I was waiting for change. Knew it would be right for you. Put it on.” Elinor’s soft drawl made her commands sound like requests, and Julie unfolded the scarf Elinor had handed her and tied it around her neck.

“No, not like that.” Elinor smiled as she reached over to twist the soft silk into a wide, loose cowl, draping the ends over Julie’s shoulder, like a model in an ad. “The gold and yellow are perfect with your hair.”

“I can’t accept this too. You’ve already done too much for me.”

“My dear, didn’t your mother tell you that being able to accept compliments and gifts gracefully is the mark of a lady?”

“I don’t think the subject ever arose. But thank you very much. For everything. I—” Suddenly she felt awkward and tongue-tied.

“Julie, promise me something. Don’t let yourself get careless about makeup.” She raised her hand to stop the protest before Julie could make it. “Faces are like paintings,” she said thoughtfully. “Some, the perfect ones, are like oils. They’re enough by themselves, don’t need artful matting and framing, but most are like pastels or watercolors. They need the right mat and frame to bring out color tones and shading. Your face is like that. It needs the right makeup. Don’t get lazy and neglect it.”

"I agree about my face. You took away my blah look, but is it really all that important, anyway?" Julie asked plaintively.

"You're darn right it is, and don't you forget it. It's just plain vanity for anyone to figure he or she doesn't need to bother. Like saying the rest of the world isn't worth her trouble."

"I guess I never thought of it that way."

"That's obvious, my dear, but you will from now on, won't you?" The cab pulled up at Casa Trilbi before Julie had a chance to answer.

Steve was nowhere in sight when they came in the lobby of the Casa Trilbi. Mona looked up from the switchboard and let out a little yelp. "I almost didn't recognize you. I love it!" she added, handing Julie her key. "Oh, you've got a visitor. He's in the lounge." She pointed to the big room with French doors that opened on the courtyard.

"Wow—Julie! What'd you do? You look gorgeous! I hardly knew you!" Ethan didn't sound just surprised; he sounded awed. He set his glass on the bar and held out both hands. "And to think you're talented too." As she put out her hands to greet him, Julie decided that Ethan was really too handsome, wondered why she'd never noticed it before.

Instead of a quick handclasp, he pulled her close. His kiss surprised her—demanding, exciting, and she closed her eyes to enjoy it for a second.

She opened them to see Steve standing in the open doorway that led from the courtyard, watching them.

"I think this is where I came in." Steve's tone was elaborately casual. He walked quickly across the room and was gone before Julie could speak.

She wanted to run after him, tell him it was all a mistake. Instead, she just stood there staring after him. She heard herself making conversation with Ethan, while inside some voice kept saying, *He thinks you lied to him. He thinks you're a liar*, like some kind of chant.

Ethan was vague about Chris, said she was fine. "But you, Julie! I can't get over it. Not just the hair—you look different. Incredible eyes." She heard his voice, and half her brain told her to be happy. Wasn't this what she'd wanted for months? The other half told her it didn't matter now. What mattered was what Steve thought. "This calls for celebration! I'm here to snatch you away from dreary toil. We're off for wild and riotous living!" Ethan didn't wait for Julie's response, simply took her elbow and propelled her through the lobby and outside.

In the cab she watched his face; he seemed keyed up. His liquid brown eyes were bright with excitement; she wondered why. He merely smiled when she asked.

The restaurant was near the Spanish Steps and had big oil paintings in wide gilt frames. Most of them

were of hard-faced, skinny old men with bony legs and sullen faces. The waiter saw her looking at the pictures and told her they were all family portraits, painted back when this was the palace of one of the old Roman nobility. The family still owned it. He pointed to one of them and said, "My great-grandfather. His granddaughter, my aunt, runs the kitchen now. We are all afraid of her."

Julie could think of nothing to reply to that, so she just tried to look sympathetic.

Everyone seemed to know Ethan; he waved to the three men playing soft rock and told the waiter to bring champagne.

"To you, Julie. Congratulations!" He raised his glass; she smiled, assuming he meant the change in the way she looked. As with the waiter, she could think of no reply, so she smiled some more. Ethan reached into his jacket pocket, took out an envelope, and handed it to her to open. She pulled out a statement form from Travelers' Art Gallery; clipped to it was a check made out to Julie Cramer for four hundred fifty dollars.

She stared at it, bewildered, and Ethan laughed out loud. "Your paintings, Julie. The acrylic of the Ponte Vecchio and the oil of the old guy in the brown hat. We sold 'em. The couple who came Saturday—the ones Chris lured in. They loved 'em."

"But—" Julie began.

Ethan held up his hand. "I didn't say anything Sunday morning at the train because they hadn't made up their minds. I didn't want to get your hopes up. They came back on Monday morning and bought both of them."

"They liked my work? Really liked it? What did they say about it?"

He chuckled. "Julie. They were willing to pay five hundred dollars for your work. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"But what did they say? Please, Ethan."

"Well, the guy liked the way you caught the sunlight on the water. Kept talking about that. Said the old guy made him sad. She said the Ponte Vecchio one would look good in the den. Right colors—stuff like that. It surprised me when they took the oil too. Both kept saying it made them sad, but they took it anyway."

"Sad! I didn't paint him sad. I painted him patient and strong—a survivor. Oh, Ethan, I've got so much to learn!" she said fiercely.

"Julie, you're really something! Here you just sold two paintings—at top dollar—and all you can bleat about is that the buyer didn't react the way you wanted. Did you, by any chance, happen to notice that the price is what we put on work by recognized artists? Doesn't that ring any bells for you? Like living expenses while you're at the Academy, maybe?"

"I thought of that before you said it, Ethan. It's just. . . ." Her voice trailed away. It felt strange to know that a painting she'd done was now someone else's property. Like a tiny bit of her belonging to someone else—because he could pay for it. She saw the puzzled, almost hurt look on Ethan's face and said, "You know the scenes painted in Michelangelo's house?"

"Which ones?"

"The ones that show him getting each of his commissions. For the first time I understand that odd expression he painted on his own face." As she spoke, it struck her that she was putting herself on the same level as Michelangelo. The idea made her laugh out loud. Ethan gave her a sharp look.

"Earth to Julie. What's funny?"

"Nothing. Let's order dinner. Sudden wealth and good fortune give me an appetite." Suddenly she felt giddy, as if she were floating. It felt odd, as if she were outside herself, watching that strange girl with burnished-copper hair smiling and talking with that incredibly good-looking man. It felt odd, but she rather liked it. With a shock she realized she was flirting with Ethan and having fun doing it. Then she remembered that Ethan was Chris's guy, and she stopped.

"What about Chris? Did she tell you to take me to dinner?"

"No, she didn't. The subject did not arise," he said flatly. Then he grinned and continued in a teasing tone, "Didn't anyone ever tell you that it's considered gauche to ask a guy about a beautiful blonde when he's busy trying to impress a gorgeous redhead?" He reached across the table to turn her face to the light, his fingers tracing a line from ear to chin; his smile faded. His voice was thoughtful. "Gorgeous is the wrong word. It's a cliché word. Piquant. Unpredictable. Impish. Desirable—very desirable. Those are the words. It's weird . . . you've been here less than a week, but you've changed."

Self-consciously she reached to touch the burnished nimbus of curls around her face. He shook his head. "It's more than that. It's like you finally stopped being apologetic and scared. Like you decided you're you and you like it." He tilted his head and raised an eyebrow; his voice was amused and pleased. "It's true. You seem different, Julie. Not just your hair or clothes. You. As if you'd come out of some cocoon—like a butterfly."

He smiled then. "Do you realize this is the first time I've ever seen you in anything but jeans and a sweatshirt? I must have been blind." He took his hand away quickly and gestured toward her plate. "Now eat your risotto and tell me about life with the geriatric crowd."

He laughed at her account of the daily walking

tours. "Hannah calls them our 'forced marches.' " He looked impressed when she talked of the travels and accomplishments of the Elderhostel group. She heard herself chattering and recognized, with a shock, that they were both enjoying it.

After dinner they danced on the tiny dance floor and took turns making impudent comments to the glowering faces in the wall paintings. She felt the eyes of other women, envying her, looking wistful, as she danced with this handsome man. She knew how they felt. She told herself that Ethan was just being nice to her—that Chris wouldn't mind. She wanted to believe it.

"Enough already with the antiquities," Ethan said when they left the restaurant. "It's time for a glimpse of modern Rome." It was too cold to sit at a sidewalk table on the Via Veneto, so they went into a little bar to sit by the window to watch the endless flow of people.

Actresses, still in stage makeup, wandered into restaurants; women in haute-couture clothes emerged from long limousines, followed by men in expensive suits and carefully styled hair. Buses with oversized windows disgorged hordes of camera-carrying tourists; street-smart youths in tight jackets jostled the crowds, picking pockets and snatching purses; bored carabinieri arrested a few.

Ethan kept up a running commentary as they drank cups of dark, rich hot chocolate.

They walked beside the Tiber River. The full moon made little silver dots on the water, and she wondered idly why there were no boats or people. Cars zipped along the busy thoroughfare on the other side, their taillights making bobbing red dots; a brightly lit streetcar clanged and rattled, the riders' heads making big, black dots on the windows. Somewhere a drunken tenor was singing a mournful love song. It sounded sweet and absurdly romantic. Ethan's arm went around Julie's shoulders as they strolled, the busy, pulsing, modern city on one side, the silent, ancient river on the other.

He talked about his gallery and his determination to succeed. "I'm going to make it *the* shop in Florence. The one every artist wants to get his work into. I can't paint, but I can spot talent. Like you, Julie. With me as your agent you'll really take off. What a pair we'll be!" He sounded excited, eager. He halted suddenly and pulled her around to face him. "What a pair we are, Julie," he said before he kissed her.

His lips were warm, demanding, exciting. She closed her eyes and savored the moment. She'd dreamed of this since the first time she'd seen him.

They walked all the way to the hotel, her hand tucked into his, humming snatches of old songs, and pausing often to savor again the excitement of quick

kisses. The moon turned the black of his hair silver-blue, and his face reminded her of the pagan gods whose statues filled the museums.

At the door of the Casa Trilbi, he kissed her soundly and said, "Promise me the butterfly won't crawl back into the cocoon." Then he turned quickly and was gone.

Inside, she picked up her key and a package. She heard herself thanking Mona as she made her way upstairs, lost in a haze. It seemed unreal. She'd dreamed of Ethan West, drawn his face a hundred times; he'd been remote—one of the beautiful people. Tonight she'd felt like some rare, colorful creature. As if she truly were a butterfly. "Julie Cramer, the Roman butterfly," she murmured with a grin.

In her room she pulled off the brown wrapping on the package to find a black-and-white striped box tied with wide, matching striped ribbon. An envelope of expensive, creamy stationery, with her name on it, was Scotch-taped to the box. She opened it, took out the note, and read:

My dear,

When I saw this, it made me think of you. I hope you'll accept it as a small token of gratitude.

I also hope you'll be kind enough to join me for dinner on Saturday. If you are busy or it is not a convenient day, please call. I'm still at the

*Hassler—same room. If I don't hear from you,
I'll expect you around 7 P.M.*

Cordially,

Nora Hedinger

Inside the box, beneath layers of black tissue paper, was a pure-silk blouse in shades of green and bronze. Even in the dreary glare of the single light bulb its colors shone, and its perfect styling was clear. Julie ran to the bathroom mirror and marveled at the way it reflected the color of her eyes. She'd never owned anything so exquisite.

"Something perfect," she told her face in the mirror, "and it made her think of me. For once, I'm connected with something beautiful instead of Chris."

Abruptly, she was silent. Sudden shame made her face feel hot; two red spots flamed in her cheeks. Chris!

What are you doing? she silently asked the girl in the mirror. *There are rules about your best friend's boyfriend. You forgot Chris completely. What kind of friend are you? She lends you her clothes, and you wear them on a date with her guy. Did you cut off your loyalty along with your hair? Maybe this new Julie's not just a matter of hair color and makeup.*

Chapter Six

All day Friday Julie maneuvered for a chance to talk with Steve; she waited outside the room after his morning lecture, dawdled behind to walk with him at a spot at the rear of the group on the afternoon walk. Steve was pleasant and courteous, keeping a professional distance between student and teacher.

She told herself she wasn't hurt or surprised. Kisses amid romantic ruins were just kisses; he hadn't said he loved her or anything like that. Thank heavens she hadn't said anything like that, either. She told herself that wondrous joy she'd felt listening to the nightingale was pure imagination. She told herself a lot of things.

That evening Paul said, "Julie, take the day off tomorrow. Relax. Have fun. Be a tourist."

She didn't give him a chance to change his mind. It was barely daylight when she left the Casa Trilbi the next morning.

The great, round plaza in front of St. Peter's was deserted when she arrived. Pigeons fluttered around the high obelisk, and the statues of the apostles cast

long shadows in the early sun. The white marble walls looked austere and clean, and the windows of the dome caught the morning sun, making curved stripes of gold. The Swiss guards in bright-red uniforms stood at their posts. She sat cross-legged on the concrete to sketch, trying to imprint the colors on her brain, capture the splendor of the colonnade.

The Sistine Chapel opened at ten; she was the first one in. For an hour she gawked. High above, on sturdy scaffolds, the restoration experts worked steadily, their skilled hands gently washing away the grime of centuries to reveal the vivid colors beneath. A lady standing next to Julie looked up from her guidebook at the scenes painted above and murmured, "What audacity! Daring to paint the face of God."

When her neck ached from looking up, Julie went to the wall panel and looked for Michelangelo's face down with the lost souls in hell. He'd painted himself with a faint smile, despite the torments of the damned. It puzzled her. By eleven the tour buses had arrived, and the crowds made it hard to breathe, much less look. She made her way through winding corridors, paid her fee, and rode up the elevator.

There are over five hundred steps to climb after leaving the elevator of St. Peter's Dome. One set goes up, another down. Once started, Julie could not turn back. The narrow stairway was a solid line of single-

file climbers. She climbed behind a fat man who whistled as he climbed and kept up a running stream of chatter with his wife ahead of him. He stopped whistling somewhere around the two-hundredth step.

At one point the dome curved in so sharply that Julie had to lean sideways as she climbed. The space was so tiny, it was hard to breathe, and she felt clammy and dizzy with claustrophobia. At that exact point the steps reversed direction, and a straight, narrow ladder led up to an open door and air pouring in from above. Michelangelo had planned it that way. She'd pored over his blueprints, still stored at the Institute.

She stepped out and breathed in crisp morning air. Now hundreds of people milled in the piazza. Beyond, all Rome was spread—ancient structures of original Roman brick, orange in the sunlight; cathedrals white with marble taken from Roman temples; stark modern office buildings; tiny cars scuttling through narrow, old streets; the shiny ribbon of river winding beneath ancient and modern bridges. Behind her lay the vast green park of the Vatican gardens. Julie ached with its beauty, but didn't open her sketch pad. She could experience perfection; she could not reproduce it.

Replete and oddly weary, she clumped down the steps to the vaulted splendor of the church to stare

up from the high altar over the tomb of St. Peter into the dome so far above it.

“He must have known how it would affect people. As if it held the entire world—all that is infinite and absolute.” Steve’s voice didn’t even surprise her. It seemed so right that he should be there.

It wasn’t until they’d left the cathedral and were crossing the piazza that she thought to question his presence.

“How come you’re here? I thought you were going to Tivoli Gardens with the group today,” she said as they walked beneath the round columns Bernini designed so many years ago.

“Been there,” he responded laconically. He halted and pulled her around to look at him. “You look beat. Been here for hours, right?” She nodded. “You need food.” He sounded faintly patronizing. “Time for lunch.” He took her elbow and propelled her through the lines of people, steered her across streets and into a restaurant.

Over fragrant bowls of tortellini they talked and chuckled like a pair of truant kids turned loose for an afternoon. He teased her about her new hairstyle, but she liked the way his eyes never strayed from her face and the way they sent sparks when he laughed. She wasn’t quite ready for his serious tone when he asked to see her sketches. She was scared, but, strangely, never thought of refusing to show them.

Timidly, like a shy apprentice, she handed him her sketches.

She watched his face while he studied them, trying to read his expression, aware suddenly of how desperately it mattered to her what he thought. He looked at each of them, then went back and looked again. He pulled out the one of the angry little boy that she'd done at the airport and said, "I relate to this kid. I know just how he feels. It's good, Julie. Really good. Sort of envy the kid. At his age he can still stage a tantrum."

Steve sounded almost wistful, and she had a sudden picture of him banished to the sidelines while the other kids played baseball.

"Would you like it?" she asked shyly.

"You serious?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Of course I would. Sure you want to?" She nodded, pleased that he liked it. "Would you sign it?" His voice was almost diffident, and she smiled as she printed CRAMER in the corner.

"You're good, Julie." She started to speak, but he held up his hand. "Not just good. Gifted. I've spent enough years learning about art to recognize talent. With time and training, who knows? Your perspective needs work—angles, technical skill." He sounded sad; she wondered why.

"I know," she said. "That's why I'm so thrilled

about being accepted at the Academy. And I haven't even told you the best part. I sold two paintings—now I can pay my rent and survive for another term. Ethan brought the check on Thursday." As soon as she said it, she wished she hadn't mentioned Ethan, but he didn't seem to notice. Quickly she added, "It means I can train at the same place Michelangelo did, where he taught, just like you do—only he taught technique, not history." Suddenly she was self-conscious. "I don't mean I'm comparing myself to Michelangelo. I just mean—"

He held his hand up again, and they both grinned. For a second it was there again, that total rapport, the total awareness of each other, like an electric charge surging between them. Then, abruptly, he looked at the check, laid a stack of lira notes on the table, and strode to the door. She followed slowly, puzzled and a little hurt.

They meandered through the city, brushing off pickpockets, window wishing at smart shops. "That would be perfect on you," Steve announced, pointing at a green cashmere coat in a shop window. Her eyes lit up when she saw it. "Come on! Try it on," he urged, pulling her inside behind him.

She loved the silky feel of the lining, loved seeing the three Julies in the triple mirror. Most of all, she loved the way Steve's eyes glowed with admiration when they met hers in the mirrors. She glanced at

the price tag, sighed, and handed it back to the saleslady. "Would you let me buy it for you?" Steve asked, his voice shy.

"Thank you, Steve, but you know I couldn't." She tried to sound casual, but for a second a sense of rage swept over her. She hated being poor. Bitterly she wondered if there would ever be anything in her life that wasn't determined by how much it cost. She forced herself to smile brightly as they left the shop.

At the Trevi Fountain she tossed in a coin and said, "I wish I were rich enough to buy that coat."

Steve laughed and tossed his coin, but he didn't tell her what he wished. When he turned back to face her, their hands brushed together, and she glanced up quickly to meet his eyes. She lifted her lips, expecting to meet his. Instead, he let out a deep sigh and turned to watch the kids scrambling for coins in the water.

She stood there, rebuffed and humiliated, blinking back hot tears and biting her lips when they trembled. She wanted to grab his arm, make him look at her, beg him to explain. Instead, she took a deep breath and summoned up her wounded pride. Deliberately she told herself she was furious at being rejected.

Her voice was taut, caustic. "You're quite safe, Steve. I have no intention of ensnaring you. Don't worry about it. Falling in love is the last thing I need right now. I realize you were just being kind to the dumb kid on her first day in romantic Rome. Right

now I've got to rush because I've got an important dinner date this evening."

She was gone before he could reply. She strode, unseeing, through the bustling crowds, carefully holding on to her anger, not allowing herself the luxury of despair. It almost worked.

There was barely time to shower and dress for dinner with Nora Hedinger. She brushed her short curls till they shone and took special pains with makeup, the way Elinor had shown her. Carefully she did the buttons on the new blouse, enjoying the feel of the fabric, noting the way its colors made her eyes amber instead of yellow. Outside, a pair of doves called softly to each other, the sound wistful and forlorn in the deepening evening shadow.

"Forget it, lady dove," she said as she pulled the shutter closed. "You're better off without him."

When Julie arrived at the Villa Hassler and went up to the front desk, the clerk asked haughtily, "Your name, please?"

"Julie Cramer. Mrs. Hedinger is expecting me, I believe."

His hauteur faded at the name, and he turned hastily to the phone, spoke into it briefly, and then escorted Julie to the elevator.

Nora Hedinger opened the door and motioned Julie inside. Julie had not really looked at the room

when she'd been there the first time. She did now. It was brightly lit, with glasses and canapés on a marble coffee table midway between a pair of blue-damask sofas. Blue brocade covered the walls behind delicate watercolor landscapes; a desk and tables of polished mahogany held vases of pink and lavender flowers. She'd never sat in a room like this. She murmured a greeting and sat down, too awed to pretend to be casual.

Nora smiled, poured golden liquid into glasses, and handed one to Julie, saying, "I thought we'd have a glass of sherry here before going up for dinner." Her smile widened as she followed Julie's eyes. "It is a nice room, isn't it?" she said complacently. "They say Mussolini installed the legendary Clara here at the Villa Hassler, but I doubt it was in this room." She sipped and smiled, giving Julie time, putting her at ease with practiced skill. Her voice was low, and her tone held the unconscious arrogance of a natural aristocrat.

Julie liked hearing Nora talk, liked the way she laughed when Julie said the doctor's nurse had called to say he was too busy to talk. "So I still don't know what was wrong. What did he say? Are you okay now?"

"My dear, it seems I have a potassium deficiency. They did a blood test. I've since been medicated and

assured that it won't happen again. Now tell me about you. What brings you to Rome?"

Nora leaned back, glass in hand, and waited, smiling. Julie told of her job at the Casa Trilbi, described the daily "forced marches," the people in the Elderhostel group. Nora drew Julie out like an emcee on a talk show. She heard herself saying aloud the things she'd thought and observed and never voiced before. Nora made her feel charming and clever. She basked in the sensation.

The phone rang. Julie studied Nora as she spoke. Soft waves of white hair framed a narrow face. Wrinkles lined the forehead; a deep crevice was on either side of the mouth. Only the eyes were young—the blue, lively eyes of an eager, mischievous child.

Nora hung up the phone and turned, "That was the restaurant. They're expecting us shortly. Okay?" Julie smiled her assent. Nora said, "Tell me about your work in Florence. Do you get to roam among the masterpieces? What exactly do you do?" The blue eyes widened at Julie's account of her restoration work on a Vasari.

"It's finished and stored in my cell right now," Julie concluded proudly.

"Cell?"

"Actually, that's what it is. The dungeons from when the building was a palace have been converted to students' workrooms, complete with video cam-

eras trained on all doors and gates that lock automatically. It still surprises me.”

“What? That they need security?”

“No. The idea that dumpy Julie Cramer, from Felton, Iowa, is one of the chosen few with a special card and code number. When I first came, I was so scared I’d get mixed up and punch in the wrong numbers that I wrote them inside the sleeve of my coat. I still keep the card in a special folder in my bureau, take it out only when I’m going to the Institute. And I’m still surprised when I push it through the slot and lights flash and the gate opens.”

Nora chuckled softly. “How satisfactory! The latest electronic gear to protect an old masterpiece, stored in the royal dungeon. Imagine what the prince would say.”

“It’s a cinch he wouldn’t let some peasant from Iowa have access to his art collection.”

“My dear, you’re an artist, not just a peasant. Furthermore, you know it. If you don’t, you should.” Her voice was casual, but her eyes were fierce. They sat in silence for a second; then Nora rose quickly. “Time for dinner. I’m ravenous.”

The Villa Hassler Hotel sits on the hill above the Spanish Steps; its restaurant is on the top floor. For the second time in one day Julie had all Rome spread beneath her, but now it was a boundless sea of twinkling lights. The outlines of spotlighted ruins stood

out, austere and white, and the black ribbon of the Tiber River made a pattern through the yellow glow. She gawked. The waiter smiled, as proud as if he'd personally designed the view.

"I've never been in a restaurant like this. I didn't even know they existed."

"Yes, the view is magnificent," Nora replied.

"I agree, but that wasn't what I meant. I meant I've never eaten in a place where the menu has no prices, or where the silver's so heavy it feels funny in my hand, or where there's a silver plate under my china plate."

Nora smiled, gestured to the waiter. While they conferred, Julie looked around her, noted that each table had its own waiter. She spotted a man wearing a great, gold key on a chain. Nora noticed her puzzled stare. "That's the wine steward, my dear," she said, smiling. "Now, may I make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"Savor the novelty. Wallow in it. Let the waiter and me decide. You eat. A lot." Her tone was amused, with no hint of condescension. Julie smiled her agreement, and Nora gestured to the wine steward. When he left, Julie felt Nora's eyes on her.

"What's it like to live like this?" Julie blurted. Her words astonished her. Quickly she added, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"You're not rude at all. It's a good question. I

gather you mean, 'What's it like to be rich?' Well, I can tell you what my life's been like."

She did. With the same charm and ease she'd shown when questioning Julie, Nora told of herself. She talked of her dead husband and the home they'd shared with children, of grandchildren, of her life when she was Julie's age.

"We thought it was smart to smoke cigarettes and that pot was something to cook in. I grew up when a 'meaningful relationship' meant getting along well with my cousins." She paused for a sip of coffee. "Which reminds me. You haven't said anything about your love life. Do you have any current 'meaningful relationships'?"

"Not really. I had a thing for my roommate's guy for a long time. Then I met this guy on the train. Turns out he's one of the instructors. I thought we had something going. I was wrong. It's just as well, anyway."

"Why is that?"

"I don't want to be in love. I don't want any emotional tangles. I want to be an artist." Julie heard the defiant tone in her voice and smiled, but when she continued, her voice was quiet, intense. "That's not accurate. I don't just *want* to paint. I *have* to. I can't let myself be sidetracked. Painting isn't just a career with me; it's more like an affliction. I'm never free of it."

“What does that mean?”

“Well, I went to college on my father’s insurance money, and I came to Florence on my mother’s insurance money. Seems people have to die in order for me to be an artist. I don’t know about my father, but I know darn well that’s not what my mother wanted. But I did it. I had to. But at the same time I copped out.”

“Copped out? How?”

“All through college I took every painting, drawing, or technique class there was, but I also studied art history and restoration. It was my job insurance. Even in Florence—at the Institute—I studied and painted my head off, *and* I took the course in restoration. That’s a cop-out.”

“In what way?”

“Because restoring someone else’s work is a technical skill. Like playing scales instead of writing music.”

“And when you paint?”

“It’s silly, really. When it’s going right, nothing else matters. It’s as though the rest of the universe doesn’t exist. It doesn’t happen every time, of course, but when it does, it’s wonderful. And the only time it happens is when I’m painting—well, almost the only time.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s what I meant about being sidetracked. Last

Saturday, when Steve—the instructor I met on the train—kissed me, I felt the way I do when I’m painting and it’s going right. It was great, and it was also scary. Means I could get sidetracked by falling in love.”

“Does being in love mean being sidetracked, as you call it? Couldn’t it simply widen your range? Give you more to express than ever?”

“I’m so full of things busting to come out now, it drives me crazy. Why would I want more?”

“Julie, you’re one of the rare ones. The gods gave you a gift. It’s yours. Use it. But don’t let it use you. Don’t let one gift keep you from knowing all the others in the world. The capacity to love is a gift too.” She paused to look out the window for a moment.

When she went on, her voice was thoughtful. “It’s just possible, you know, that one gift might enhance the other.” She smiled. “And as for the instructor, I would wager that if you felt there was ‘something going,’ as you put it, between you, there was.” Julie sniffed. “All right. I’m an incurable romantic, but it’s one of the privileges of age. Shall we go, my dear?”

The lovely black car was waiting when Julie came down to the lobby. She rode back to the Casa Trilbi thinking of what Nora Hedinger had said. Was there some reason for Steve’s behavior? Or did she just want to think there was?

Mona handed her the message slip along with her

key, and Julie went straight to the phone booth. Chris sounded cross when she answered and wasted no time getting to the point.

"Look, Julie. My folks found out about the Academy. I've been summoned home like an errant child. I need my coat back."

"Of course. And your skirts too. Listen, Chris, there's a field trip to Orvieto tomorrow. That's half-way between here and Florence. I'll catch a train there and bring your stuff back and then come back here in the evening. I'll need to get my own coat." Julie waited a moment. "Is that okay?" There was no answer. "I'll miss you, Chris," she said softly, "and I'm sorry. I wish I could do something."

"Forget it. It was bound to happen. What's this Ethan tells me about your being a flaming redhead? He was full of talk about it—and you."

"You'll see tomorrow. I should be there before six."

"And you'll need to pick up your coat then, won't you?" Chris paused for a moment. "Look, I may be out when you get here, but I'll be back before six. I'll see you tomorrow."

Chris hung up before Julie could say good-bye. As she walked up the stairs, Julie wondered if she'd imagined it or if there really had been an odd tone in Chris's voice when she mentioned Ethan.

Chapter Seven

“**T**he Romans built a fortress at Orvieto, on top of an old Etruscan city. The remains of an Etruscan temple can still be seen. The city is totally medieval; streets are too narrow for cars or buses, so we’ll park on the outskirts and walk up through the gates of the city wall. The cathedral is the only example of Gothic architecture in the Rome area. . . .” Paul’s voice droned gently over the bus’s P.A. system.

Julie sat staring at the back of Steve’s neck, wishing she could run her finger along the sharp, straight line where his thick, unruly hair was cropped. The back of his neck looked vulnerable, like a small boy’s, all scrubbed for Sunday school. The idea made her smile, but with it came the realization that Steve was not a boy; he was a man, and he’d made it clear he wanted no part of her.

Face it, she told herself. You’ll never look like Chris. He’s a nice guy, and he felt sorry for you. That’s all. Men like Steve fall in love with women who look like Chris. Life’s like that. Accept it.

Deliberately she turned her eyes to look out the

window at the rolling Tuscan hills. Tall poplars, spaced like sentries, lined the horizon; between them lacy almond and fruit trees etched fine black lines against the sky. Trucks filled with young people waved, the girls' hair blowing wild, the faces bright in the warm spring morning.

Shop owners greeted the group, smiling, eager for trade. Julie hurried ahead to check the café for lunch. The owner looked doubtful when she said she was the group's agent. He looked relieved and reassured when she haggled over the price and demanded to see the kitchen.

When she came out, she climbed the hill to wander among the broken walls of the old fortress. The sun felt warm, and the new grass smelled good. She sat down on a rock and forced herself to think calmly.

Was Steve's apparent rejection the reason she ached for his love? For months she'd yearned for Ethan to notice her. Envied Chris. And last Thursday, when Ethan finally had noticed her? Just a silly game. Fun, but just a game. And Steve? That was no game. She tried to recapture her anger from yesterday, but it was gone, leaving only dull emptiness. She closed her eyes and told herself that eventually she'd get used to that too.

She opened them to find Steve standing beside her, his eyes fixed on her, his mouth a taut, thin line. He reached for her hands and pulled her to her feet. She

pulled her hands away quickly. "Isn't it a gorgeous day?" She kept her voice carefully impersonal, did not look at him when she spoke.

He turned her face toward him. "Your eyes are green, like they were on the train."

"Are they?" He nodded. She made her voice bright, brisk. "Did Paul send you? Should I be doing something?"

"Yes. This." He pulled her to him and bent to kiss her. For a second she tried to resist, to remind herself of what she'd said yesterday. Then, again, that wondrous joy swept through her, and she gave herself up to revel in its pressure. Together they blotted out the rest of the universe. Some tiny corner of her mind noted that this was even better than the glory of painting well.

Wordless, astonished, they moved apart. He inhaled deeply, then let all the air out again. "They're yellow again. Actually shiny gold." His voice was husky. "We've got to talk." She smiled in agreement. "You really laid it on the line yesterday, Julie."

She wondered if his eyes were crinkling with joy or from the sun's glare; she wanted to touch the tiny lines with her fingertips, had to remind herself to listen to his words when he continued.

"For starters, let's get one thing straight. I was not and am not being 'kind to a dumb kid.' Nor did I ever

think you were trying to 'ensnare' me, as you put it. You know that as well as I do, if you're honest."

He paused, as if daring her to disagree. She said nothing, wanting to believe him but remaining cautious.

Gently his hand brushed a stray curl back from her forehead, his fingers tangling themselves in the shiny mop. He seemed lost in thought, as though searching for words. Quietly, slowly, he went on. "You're right about one thing. I tried hard not to fall in love with you. Kept away on purpose. Last night, when I pictured you having dinner with that Ethan, with his shaving-cream-ad face, I nearly went nuts. I'm in love with you, Julie Cramer. Crazy, zany, wonderfully, head over heels in love. And you know it, don't you?"

Before she replied, she pulled his face down to kiss him once more, breathe in his sharp, clean scent of soap, nestle her head in the hollow of his shoulder. Her voice sounded more like a purr when she spoke. "Actually, I had dinner with Nora Hedinger, the lady I met when she fell down. She was right too."

"Right?"

"She said I wasn't mistaken. You felt it too."

"She told you I was in love with you?"

"Well, she said I couldn't feel the way I do unless you felt it too."

"And how do you feel, Julie?"

"You know how, Steve. I suppose I must have

loved you before I even knew your name. I just didn't admit it on the train."

"So admit it now. Say, 'I love you, Steve.' "

She leaned toward him to speak the words, but their lips brushed again, and it was several seconds before she spoke. When she did say the words, her voice was thick, almost hoarse.

Paul's shout startled them. "Hey, you two." He smiled at the way they leaped apart and sounded amused when he said, "It's lunchtime. The new spring wine has been uncorked, and the owner is screaming for Julie."

She gave Steve's hand a quick squeeze and raced down the hill.

The wine was wonderful; the lunch was superb; the day was glorious; the whole world seemed aglow. Julie ate ravenously; so did Steve. There were toasts and songs and funny stories from the group, and as they drank and sang and laughed, their eyes met across the table and each could see the other's tiny face in them.

Frances and Theresa Steed, the two sisters who shared their table, smiled like a pair of doting aunts, enjoying their happiness. Theresa begged them not to make her laugh because it made her cough more, but she smiled when she said it. "Having a good time in a lovely setting is the best cure for a cold," she asserted.

"I'll ride up with you," Steve said when Julie told him about going up to Florence to return Chris's clothes.

"You can't. You've got to do the lecture on the old fortress and be there for tonight's program." She loved his expression of annoyed resignation; it made her laugh softly. "I'll catch the four o'clock train, be in Florence by five, take the six-thirty from Florence, and be back in Rome before ten tonight."

"I'll meet the train." He moved quickly to help carry bags and bundles of souvenirs down the hill to the bus.

Julie watched him, proud of the gentle respect he showed toward the men and his old-world courtliness toward the women. Proud that she loved him; proud that he loved her. He planted a quick kiss on her forehead and ran down the hill, his long legs moving in awkward, loping strides, like a modern Ichabod Crane.

He loves me . . . he loves me . . . he loves me . . .
The words made a happy little chant running through her brain, and she wondered idly if anyone had ever actually exploded from pure happiness.

Humming under her breath, Julie squatted on the step to sketch the metal sculpture of the cathedral doors washed in the reddish, yellow sunlight. She had drawn the outline and was working on color tones when she looked up. There she was!

In the huge open doorway, a little girl stood, holding a white chicken under her arm. She just stood there, facing the door, with her back to Julie. When the chicken squawked, the girl put her hand over its mouth. That was the only time she moved. Black hair hung down her back in a thick, tangled mass, and the chicken's white feathers and red crop stood out sharp against its blackness.

Even while she was doing it, Julie knew this was going to be a good sketch. She'd captured the taut, independent line of the child's back, the sheen of the bronze door. Julie worked furiously, frantic lest the child move or go away, absorbed in capturing light tones before the sun moved.

When she finished, she sprayed fixative and stood up. At the same moment, the child turned and walked toward her. Without intending to, Julie motioned her to come over, and when she did, Julie handed her the sketch. The girl looked amazed, then incredibly pleased. She murmured something to the chicken and was gone before Julie could change her mind.

The clock atop the tower read four-thirty. Enraged, Julie glared at it and checked the time against her watch. She'd missed the train for Florence. No point in railing at herself. She tucked her sketch pad, charcoal, pastels, and fixative into their neat little slots in her bag and walked slowly to the coffee bar

across the plaza. Vaguely she wished she hadn't given the sketch away, wondered if she could recapture it from memory, then decided that making a gift to someone was the perfect gesture, a thanks offering to the gods for their gift of Steve's love.

She grinned wryly, aware she was being melodramatic and enjoying it. The waiter smiled back when he brought her hot chocolate and a newspaper to read while she waited for the train back to Rome.

The milling mob at the train station was a giveaway. Even before she got inside, Julie knew something was amiss.

The sign read: *A PROTEST FOR JUSTICE! To demonstrate the need for better wages for engineers and conductors and make the government and populace aware of that need: NO TRAINS WILL OPERATE from 6 P.M. Sunday night until 6 A.M. Monday morning.*

The couple standing next to her asked Julie to translate. She had an absurd impulse to giggle at their expressions; both looked so unbelieving, so betrayed. Julie tried to explain that wildcat strikes were a fact of life in Italy. The pair glared at the sign and at Julie and stalked off.

They got the last hotel room in Orvieto. The clerk was giving them a key when Julie came in. He made a helpless gesture when she asked about other hotels; he looked so distressed when he admitted the phone

system was out of order that Julie felt sorry for him. Every restaurant and café was crammed with stranded tourists; the shops stayed open long after dark, and an air of perverse holiday fun filled the town.

The smell of sweet spring wine filled the plaza, and couples danced to a concertina played by an old man in a shabby plaid jacket. He watched as Julie sketched him and told her she'd made him look too old and the piazza too clean. She decided he was right.

Later the priest came and unlocked the great bronze doors of the cathedral. Footsteps echoed as the crowd trooped into the vaulted chamber. Voices were muted, subdued; parents shushed sleepy children, crooning softly as they settled them down on pews or the floor. Julie found a spot on a vacant pew in a side chapel dedicated to St. Barbara, put her bag under her head, and stretched out. A few candles flickered, making eerie shadow patterns on the walls and ceiling.

She lay thinking of Steve, picturing the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled, hoping he was missing her, listening to all the small, human sounds around her—tiny grunts and hushed murmurs, the scrape of leather against stone, the soft squish of fabric against wood. From somewhere a bell sounded. She meant to count all the strokes, but she fell asleep before the twelfth.

Chapter Eight

Steve was standing at the door when Julie got out of the cab at the Casa Trilbi next morning. He looked tired, and his tone was accusing when he spoke. "For Pete's sake, Julie! Why didn't you ever tell me your address? When I heard about the strike, I borrowed Paul's car. I was clear out of town, on the toll road to Florence, before I realized I didn't know where to go when I got there. Blast it! You're not in any phone books—nothing. I was going nuts."

He pulled her close in a quick embrace, and she smothered her impulse to laugh at his abused tone.

"And a cheery good morning to you, too, sir," she said when he released her. He looked surprised for a second; then both broke into laughter. For a few minutes they simply stood there in the bright morning sun, arms about each other, laughing.

Inside he said, "Well, next time I decide to play the gallant hero off to the rescue of the stranded damsel, I'll take an aspirin instead. Felt like a fool, racing off half-cocked and driving around like an idiot looking for a phone that was working—only to find out

there was no Julie Cramer listed. I didn't get back till late."

She started to tell him what had happened in Orvieto, but the group was waiting for him in the lounge for the morning session. She decided it could wait until later. Mona handed Julie a stack of notes for phone calls people wanted made and messages they wanted translated to Italian. It was almost an hour later when she got upstairs to her room.

Julie felt grubby, stiff, smelly, eager for a shower. The hot water felt good, and she sang along with the birds in the courtyard below while she towed her hair by the open window. They flew off suddenly, and she recognized Paul's voice.

". . . won't make an exception, Steve. I tried, believe me. Even got old Costa on the phone. You should have heard him! Sounded like he was pleading a case for the Supreme Court."

"What did he say?" Steve sounded tense.

"Went on and on about how rules are what separate men from animals. You've heard him. Anyway, it boiled down to, and I quote, 'A man who opts to teach at the Academy agrees to abide by Academy laws. When he fails to do so, the Academy has no choice but to remove him. The same applies to a student.' "

Julie crouched beside the window, careful to keep her head below the ledge, intentionally eavesdrop-

ping. Somehow she felt certain that their conversation was important and that she had to hear it. She strained to catch every word.

“But those rules were made a hundred years ago. It’s 1989, for Pete’s sake.” Steve’s tone was half frustration and half desperation. “It’d be funny if it weren’t so tragic. They knew Marco wasn’t guilty of anything, but he got fired anyway. Best watercolorist around, and they toss him out.”

“What really happened with Marco?”

“Oh, some student who’d been turned down called and asked him to look over her work one more time. He agreed. She came to his apartment, showed him her work. He told her to forget it. She left. Next thing he knew, he was in Costa’s office, being dismissed.”

“What did she accuse him of?”

“She told them that he said he’d sponsor her as a student if she agreed to spend the night with him. She said she’d refused and that was why she’d been rejected by the Academy. It was a pack of lies, of course. Her work didn’t merit acceptance, but that didn’t do Marco any good. He didn’t have to be guilty, just accused.” Steve’s tone was harsh.

“Chris, how could you?” Julie wasn’t sure if she’d spoken aloud or merely thought the words, but they shocked her. How could she even think such a thing? What kind of friend was she to imagine Chris doing such a mean, vindictive thing? She felt ashamed, as

though she owed Chris an apology. She pushed the thought aside and strained to hear more.

"Why do you suppose she did it? What did she get out of it?" Paul sounded thoughtful.

"Chance to get even, I guess. Who knows? Whatever, it has nothing to do with my problem. I want to marry the girl." As she heard those words, Julie felt a quick shiver and bit her lip to keep from making any noise. "Trouble is, how do we live? The Foundation pays my salary and lets me work on my dissertation. If I have to leave, I can't support a wife. And Foundation rules say staff members can't be married to each other. If she's in, I'm out."

Julie peered down in time to catch Steve's wry grin before he went on. "Real Catch 22, isn't it? I'd probably think it was funny if it was happening to somebody else."

"Steve, maybe you could stay. After all, it isn't as if she'd already started working at the Academy. Have you thought about that?"

"I'm ashamed to admit, I have. If she were just mildly talented. Just competent. But she's good, Paul. Really good. I saw some rough sketches last Saturday. Quick, hurried studies. Needs training, but it's there. That rare quality. She belongs at the Academy."

For a few seconds neither of them spoke. Julie poked her head up to be sure they had not gone in-

side. They were watching while Selmo picked the flowers for the lunch tables. Steve had his hands in his pockets, his chin thrust forward, his body taut with restrained energy.

"It's not as if we could just wait for two years. She'll be one of the staff members—an instructor with the right to compete for the good commission jobs. Get the respect her talent deserves. Everything. She cares so much, Paul." Steve's voice was husky, thick with concern.

"And what about you?" Paul's voice was gentle. "You told me you wanted to work at the Academy—'for the rest of my life' were your words, if I remember correctly. You've got years of research left before your dissertation will be ready. What'll you do?"

Julie could barely hear Paul's voice, and when Steve answered, he spoke so softly she missed the first words.

She strained her ears and heard him saying, "... but since it's obvious we both can't stay, it'll have to be me who leaves." Then, more loudly, his voice almost strident, "Look, don't say anything about this to Julie. She'd never marry me if she knew it meant my *having* to leave. She knows how I feel about it. I won't have her feeling guilty. She's had enough of that. She knows nothing about the Academy rules, and I'm not about to tell her." He said the words flatly, like someone reading a decree.

“Okay, Steve. I’ll keep my mouth shut. I just wish there were some way to make the Foundation join the twentieth century. By the way, thanks for filling the tank on the car. Noticed it when I drove in this morning. Never heard you return it last night.”

Their voices trailed away, and Julie heard the sound of the door closing. She sat there, on the floor. As if her mother were in the room, Julie heard her mother’s voice: “If you listen when you aren’t supposed to, you’ll hear things you didn’t want to know.”

Wearily she stood up. “You were right, Mom,” she said grimly. “And not just about eavesdropping. So now what?”

While she dressed, she made herself take stock. Slowly, as if she were reading a complex report, she spoke to her face in the mirror, pronouncing each word carefully. “If you miss your chance at the Academy, it’ll never come again. You could end up resenting him. If he leaves because of you, he’s out of a job and his Ph.D. is down the drain. He could end up hating you.” She caught her expression in the mirror. When she held her mouth that way, she looked like her mother. She made a wry face. “Maybe Mom was right. I should’ve studied shorthand,” she said dryly.

Suddenly she wanted to howl, lean out the window and shake her fist at heaven, have a tantrum like the little boy at the airport.

She didn't get the chance. The knock on the door made her jump, and she hurried to open it. Frances Steed stood there, her round face pale, and her usually neat hair hanging in untidy clumps. "Julie, Theresa is sick. Really sick. She needs a doctor."

Julie followed the sturdy little form down the corridor; they could hear the labored breathing while they were still in the hall.

The next hour was a blur. Julie bullied the doctor from the Villa Hassler into sending an ambulance. She translated for Frances at the hospital desk, for the doctor when he talked to Frances and Theresa, and for the nurse who was tending Theresa; Julie felt grateful to be the lucky one, the one who was busy.

Then the long hours of waiting began. People from the group came and went. Oddly, it was Lilianne, in her exotic cape, who seemed best able to help Frances get through the hours. She seemed to know when to talk and when to be silent, and Julie wondered if that was something she'd learned from her own past or simply a gift she'd been born with.

Julie stayed there with Frances Steed, in that shiny, clean, modern hospital in Rome, so far from the sisters' home in Nebraska. For three days Frances watched while Theresa struggled to stay alive, Julie at her side. At four A.M. on the fourth day, Theresa Steed died of pneumonia.

In the hours that followed, Julie found herself

thinking how odd it was that artists always pictured grief with a gaunt, drawn face. She'd never thought of a round, pink, dumpling face when she'd imagined desolation. Frances Steed's face was round and jolly, like Mrs. Santa Claus on a Christmas card.

Frances wore little half-glasses and bright, flowered blouses. She wore a blue one the day her sister died. Her round face looked crumpled and bruised when she'd pulled her hand from the grip of her dead sister, and Julie had felt helpless and useless in the face of her grief. Frances signed all the forms, and Julie made calls to the phone numbers back in Nebraska.

In the cab to the airport, Frances sat very straight, with her hands folded in her lap. A small, steady stream of tears ran down her face beneath her glasses. She didn't seem to be aware of them, and when they bounced on her hand, she looked down in surprise.

In a soft, dreamy voice, as though she were talking to herself, Frances said, "Crazy. I spent most of my life envying Theresa. She was the smart one. She was Mom's favorite. If we hadn't taken this trip together, I never would have known that all those years she was envying me."

Julie watched her walk down the covered walkway to the plane, round and bouncy in blue pants and tennis shoes, and when she turned to wave, Julie could

see the shiny tears still running down beneath her glasses.

Back at the Casa Trilbi, Mona handed Julie two messages. She recognized the thick, creamy stationery that Nora Hedinger used. The message bore yesterday's date. It read:

My dear,

They told me of your sad duties when I called to suggest we have lunch. Your nice Mr. Kerns took the time to come by in person. I'm leaving Rome for a few days.

Sorry I missed you, but I'm glad we had a chance to become friends.

As ever,

Nora Hedinger

The other one was scrawled on a memo pad from the desk of the Casa Trilbi; it had no date, just said:

Am in Rome. Will pick you up for dinner. Lots to talk about. For instance: Will you marry me?

*Love,
Ethan*

She stuffed both into her pocket. Vaguely she wondered what game Ethan was playing now. Whatever

it was, she was too numb and weary to care, and she didn't want to play anymore.

On leaden feet Julie made her way upstairs. In her room she sat down heavily, the two bits of paper still in hand. She felt listless, drained, resigned. *Get used to it. This is how it's going to be*, she told herself dully. During those long hours at the hospital, while she'd sat beside Frances, Julie had had plenty of time to think—and scold herself for thinking that Chris could ruin a man's career out of spite.

Over and over in her mind she had replayed Steve and Paul's conversation in the garden below her window. Finally, grimly, she'd made herself accept the facts. Steve and she loved each other, but love wouldn't be enough. If Steve had to leave the Academy to marry her, she would feel guilty. In time she'd resent him for that guilt. If she gave up the chance to study there, she would end up hating either him or herself or both.

She'd striven all her life for a chance to study with master artists, never imagining what the real price would be. Idly she reread the note from Nora Hedinger. "He can't be 'my' nice Mr. Kerns," she murmured, "no matter how much I wish he could."

As she stared at the words on paper, Julie remembered something Nora Hedinger had said: "I've found, my dear, that life extracts payment from us all. The person who has talent often pays dearly for

his gift. I suspect even your idol, Michelangelo, paid for his genius—or perhaps it was those whom he loved who paid. Nothing comes without cost.”

Julie had wondered what she was talking about. Now her mouth twisted into a distorted smile at the thought that, for her, the “cost” of being an artist was Steve.

She glanced at the note from Ethan, vaguely astonished at how unimportant his flippant words seemed now and how they would have thrilled her only weeks ago. Had it really been less than two weeks since she’d left Florence on that train? Since she’d first seen or talked to Steve? Would she turn back the calendar if she could? Never have known the wonder and glory of that first kiss amid the ancient ruins?

A great, aching shudder shook her, and with a sob she flung herself face down on the bed. She wept in rage at the blinding drive within her, more powerful even than her love for Steve. At that moment she hated her so-called “gift.” They poured out, long-pent-up tears, hot and salty, and oddly comforting.

Finally, quivering and spent, she sat up, drew a deep breath, and said aloud, “Okay, enough already. Get with it, girl. They’re not paying you to loll around feeling sorry for yourself.”

She got up and moved to the basin to splash water on her face and whip a brush through her short, curly mop. It still startled her to see that impish, gamine

face stare back from the mirror. *You've got the wrong face for tragedy, lady. You're strictly comic relief*, she told herself as she applied blush and lipstick. *Keep your broken heart private. No need for Steve to know you were eavesdropping on him. Better to have him think you're a flirt than an ambition-driven artist.*

Paul was waiting downstairs, his round face flushed and his pale eyes strained behind the shiny lenses. "You okay?" he asked. She nodded brightly, and he went on. "Steve and Hannah and I have been doing our best, but none of us knows who to talk to at the bus company for the field trip to Tarquinia. And the chef wants to know what to pack for the picnic. And the travel agent needs to confirm what time the group will be leaving on Sunday." He handed her an untidy stack of papers stuffed into a folder and said ruefully, "All the stuff's in here."

She smiled at his relieved expression and took the folder. He was gone before she opened it.

One of the good things about a job, Julie decided, is that it keeps the worker too busy to mope. She haggled with the bus agent, soothed the chef, juggled schedules with the travel agent, checked with the delivery service to be sure the messenger had delivered Chris's coat, and avoided Steve.

She knew the last was cowardly, but she assured herself all she had to do was survive, not win some award for being a strong character.

She was finishing the insurance forms for tomorrow's field trip when Ethan arrived. He bounded across the tiny lobby, pulled Julie to her feet, and planted a solid kiss on her lips while Mona stared from her spot behind the lobby counter.

"Why are you sitting here? Why aren't you preening and fussing and readying yourself for a wild and riotous evening? Didn't you get my note?" Ethan's merry tone and wide smile were not reflected in his eyes.

"Sorry, Ethan, I've been busy. Had a lot to catch up on. How's Chris? Has she left yet? She got her coat, didn't she?" Julie wanted to get back to their old level again.

"Tell you all about it at dinner. But the waiter will frown if you appear wearing pants. I'll give you fifteen minutes."

Julie caught the wistful look on Mona's face and smiled as she realized that was how she must have looked every time Chris had gone out with Ethan.

Briskly she showered and changed and put on the blouse from Nora Hedinger. She loved the feel of the luxurious fabric against her skin. She grinned wryly at her reflection. *Typical*, she thought. *It's been an awful week. I feel like an emotional basket case. And I've never looked better.* She dabbed on perfume and said aloud, "Apparently I thrive on misery. Now

there's a thought for a jolly evening." She chuckled at the irony of the idea as she went down the stairs.

The restaurant at the top of the Hotel Forum overlooked Roman ruins. A big, round, orange moon hung over the city like a stage prop for a musical, and the heady scent of orange blossoms drifted past their table at the edge of the roof terrace. She smiled at the admiring glances Ethan drew from the other diners. It shocked her to realize they were admiring her too. Ethan ordered champagne. When it came, he reached across the table to cover her hand with his.

"I don't know which toast to make first," he said with a smile, "but I think we should drink to Julie the artist first. Here's to you!" He held his glass up with one hand, squeezed her fingers with the other, and sipped his champagne. She smiled, half embarrassed, half proud. "We sold the two charcoal sketches and the last acrylic. You're our featured artist, Julie. Could have sold more if I'd had them." He took his hand away to pull out an envelope. "Check's in here."

She stared, openmouthed, unable to believe what she was hearing. "Who bought them? What did they say?"

"Couple named Arneberg, from Colorado. They told me to let them know when you had other work to offer. I gather they collect work from new artists. I think they have a gallery or something. What differ-

ence does it make? Point is, they liked your work and paid for it." His grin was faintly patronizing, but his joy was real.

She smiled back, but she wondered vaguely if she'd get over the odd feeling of losing a little part of herself every time someone bought a piece of her work.

Ethan watched as she put the envelope in her purse, then he raised his glass again. "Here's to the future. With your talent and my management, the sky's the limit. We'll make Travelers' Gallery *the* gallery in Florence—people will fight to be invited to an opening. We'll keep your work limited, make it hard to come by. With the right publicity and skillful handling, you'll be on talk shows this time next year."

His dark eyes glowed with excitement, and the perfect planes of his face were highlighted by the candles. His words tumbled out, eager and proud. "Then, in a couple of years, we'll take on New York. Have to plan that carefully. Maybe have you do a special series—'Young artist returns' sort of thing."

He paused, raised his glass again. When he spoke next, his words were slow, measured. "As I said, 'To the future'—and to the future Mrs. Ethan West. You will marry me, won't you?"

She set her glass down carefully. "What about Chris?" Her voice sounded flat, accusing, and he looked startled at her tone.

"Chris caught the flight from Milan to New York

on Tuesday night. She told me to tell you that she'd left her key with Paolo. For what it's worth, I told her about us when I came back from Rome that first time. She gave me that funny smile and changed the subject. She's back in Philadelphia, and we're here."

With a quick wave of his hand, he dismissed Chris. "Important thing is, we'll be a great team, you and I. Together we'll set the art world on its ear." With a swift, efficient movement Ethan got up and pulled his chair around close to Julie's. Smoothly his arm moved around behind her to pull her tight against his chest. His lips felt warm, vibrant, demanding.

Without intending to, she found herself responding. There was none of the wondrous sense of completion and joy that she'd felt on that hill in Orvieto with Steve. She opened her eyes and noticed that the moon had turned from orange to polished silver and the man in the moon seemed to frown instead of smile at her.

"When shall we get married? We'll have to register and all that rigmarole. You're not going to want a big to-do, are you?"

Ethan's tone was smiling, confident. In spite of herself, she felt caught up in his enthusiasm. If he noticed her silence, he didn't show it.

Without waiting for her reply, he said, "Now, let's order. Being a prospective bridegroom is hungry work. Want me to order for you, or is there some-

thing special you'd like?" He looked up to summon the waiter, and while Julie watched and listened, the two of them conferred and nodded. *cap 2*

She breathed in the wondrous sweet scent of orange blossoms and leaned back in her chair, languid, remote, as if she were watching a scene in a play. As if Ethan's plans were for someone else. Ethan loved to manage things, take charge. It was restful. True, with Ethan there was no exultation, but there was cherishing. And it felt good to be cherished.

It wasn't until Ethan had kissed her good night and the cab had driven off that Julie realized Ethan had not waited for an answer to his proposal. He'd just assumed. And she'd let him. Maybe, in a way, that was as much of an answer as any. Vaguely she wondered why she hadn't told him no. At the same time, she wondered if he'd have been so eager to marry her if none of her paintings had sold. *You're getting to be a real cynic, Julie Cramer*, she told herself as she opened the shutters and leaned out to smell the clean night air.

Suddenly, just as it had that first night in Rome, the nightingale sang. As she listened to its wild, haunting call, she realized that Ethan had never mentioned love. He'd talked of marriage, of the future, of "marketing" her work. He'd said nothing of loving her or asked if she loved him. A thick, nasty knot of envy filled her throat at the bird's romantic, trilling

love call. Slowly, deliberately she turned away and began removing her makeup.

It was while she was hanging up her skirt and noticed the empty wooden hanger where Chris's coat had hung that she thought about the green cashmere coat. Swiftly, almost slyly, she took the check out of her purse. She stared at it. Sheer folly, of course. Art students don't "need" cashmere coats. In all her life she'd never done such a thing. Never been wildly extravagant.

An absurd chuckle escaped her, and she marched back to the window. "Okay," she whispered—either to the bird or to St. Francis, she wasn't sure which—"I accept the cost of having a gift, but I also get the benefits. For once I'm going to do something ridiculous, just because I want to."

Perhaps she imagined it, or perhaps the nightingale's trembling notes really did sound as if it were singing its agreement.

Chapter Nine

Julie was waiting at the bank door when it opened. The teller counted out the lira notes into her hand, stopping to wet his fingers on a little sponge. He looked bored, and she tried to look casual, as if she cashed big checks every day.

The owner was sitting at her desk, drinking coffee when Julie burst into the shop. The coat was still in the window. She waited while the owner took it off the mannequin and then slid her arms into its satin-lined sleeves, purring at the feel of its soft wool collar on her neck. The rich, dull green color made her skin look like polished ivory and her hair shine like burnished copper.

The shop lady made little cooing noises as she brushed her hand across Julie's shoulder, and they beamed at each other in the mirror. Julie counted out the money and told the woman she would wear it—no need to wrap it up.

Walking back to the Casa Trilbi, Julie smiled at herself in every shop window and tried to remember when a mere *thing* had made her this happy. A little

shiver of surprise went through her when she realized it was the Christmas that Mr. Correlli had given her the easel and her mother had given her a complete set of oils.

Her mother had said, "Actually, I should have gotten you a warm jacket, and heaven knows your boots are too small, but Christmas is a time for foolishness."

With sudden, sharp clarity Julie remembered her mother's face when she'd said that. Her dark-blue eyes had been misty, and her dainty pink mouth had trembled before she set it into a firm, tight line.

It wasn't "foolishness," Mom, Julie said silently. It was the best thing you ever gave me. Thank you. She waited for the familiar ache of guilt that thinking of her mother always gave her. It came, the quick surge of heat, then the lumpy, leaden feeling in her stomach.

She saw herself in the window of a typewriter store and stared at her reflection—a chic redhead wearing an expensive coat. *All I need is a briefcase. I look like a sharp secretary*, she thought. *Mom would finally be proud of me. That sure speaks volumes for my timing.* Her face was grim when she walked on.

Back at the Casa Trilbi she did last-minute chores, ran back to her room for her sketch pad, and checked off names as the group boarded the bus. Steve and Paul took their seats in front, and she moved to her

spot in the rear. The bus rolled along the toll road beside neatly furrowed brown fields and green pastures. Fleecy clouds made odd-shaped shadows on the ground below, and farmers glanced up to wave as they rode past.

Paul's voice sounded remote, professional as it came through the microphone. "Originally Tarquinia was the home of a cardinal who built its castle in 1473. The castle is now a museum. The city was abandoned later because of disease caused by its 'bad air'—that's where we got the word malaria."

Julie half listened. Mainly she looked at Steve. He looked absurdly young. His chin made a sharp line above the yellow collar of his knit shirt, and his eyes narrowed when the sun hit his face. She fantasized about brushing her lips across the tiny line beside his mouth, wondered if she'd feel the faint depression. *What if he does have to quit the Academy? It's not like painting. It doesn't matter as much to him.* She heard the words so clearly inside her head, she actually jumped. The words ran through her brain over and over, in rhythm with the rolling wheels.

All the while they toured the castle museum, while they toiled up medieval stairways to gaze down at the old city, one thought filled her mind. She didn't have to avoid Steve any longer. They would find some way. She felt his eyes on her and smiled, trying to tell him with her glance that she loved him—would always

love him. It was wonderful. It lasted about fifteen minutes.

When they got to the site of the Etruscan tombs, Steve began talking. "Over one hundred and fifty Etruscan tombs have been identified—most filled with art objects and wonderfully well preserved. . . ."

She stared, watched his face, watched his excited gestures as he talked of those ancient people. Saw his gleam of joy when someone asked a pertinent question and he could expand on the subject he loved. Like a sharp pain she heard his words that first night, "Florence is the only place."

Watching Steve, Julie realized her fantasy was just that. A fantasy. Steve loved his work as much as she loved painting. Her mouth curled into a distorted, rueful smile at her admission that the one place each of them could do the work he loved was the one place they could not be together. Quietly, careful not to disturb the others, she slipped back to the bus. She didn't want to watch Steve's face any longer. It hurt too much.

The farewell picnic was in the courtyard of an abandoned castle. The Mediterranean sparkled, blue and silver, beside its old wall. A soft breeze ruffled the leaves overhead, and insects made whirring noises. Julie clambered up to sit on the old stone wall and watch the water, all gold and orange in the sun-

set. Two sailboats were outlined, sharp and black against the orange of the western sky. She concentrated on sketching them—made herself work at recording the exact shade of pinkish purple where the sky met the water. While she thought about painting, she couldn't think about Steve.

"If you'll hold the bottle, I won't spill while I climb up." Steve's voice sounded eager, husky.

Without thinking, she took the bottle he held with one hand and extended the other to help him up. He squatted to line the two plastic picnic bags neatly by the wine bottle. He gently took the sketch pad from her hand, closed it carefully, and put it beneath his jacket. He sat down, breathed a deep sigh, and stared for a moment at the water. Then he pulled her to him in a long, quiet, almost solemn kiss.

This was different. The exultation was still there, the sense of fulfillment and completion, but there was more. It was as if, with this long embrace, Steve made a commitment, a promise. A long, delicious shudder went through her, and she felt Steve's answering tremor. Her fingers tangled themselves in his thick black hair, and she felt the strength of his shoulders beneath her head. They pulled apart to look hard into each other's eyes and then quickly sought each other's lips once more. When she looked again, the sailboats were gone from view.

"In a way it's almost scary, isn't it?" he murmured.

"I never knew love was like this. Like firecrackers and prayers all at the same time. I love you. But, of course, you know that." With a quick movement he took his arms from her waist and sat straight, his body rigid and formal.

Carefully, with measured movements, he lifted her hand in his, leaned over to brush his lips across her fingers, and said, "Julie Cramer, will you marry me?" His voice was thick, like velvet, and his eyes looked straight into hers. "Your eyes are green, not yellow. Why, Julie? Don't you want to marry me? I can't believe you don't love me. You couldn't fake that." He sounded both bewildered and indignant.

"It wouldn't work, Steve. What we have is great, but not enough to base a marriage on. It's better if we break it off. Better if we don't even see each other at the Academy. We'll get over it. People do." She tried to sound calm, sure. It came out flat and arrogant and harsh. She thought of telling him what she'd overheard that morning, but it seemed pointless. He'd protest, and she'd want to believe him, and it would just make it harder. This way he could get mad at her. It would be easier for him this way.

"Is it that guy from Florence? Is that it? Mona told me he was there last night. You let him buy you that coat, didn't you? I was your Roman fling, but the interlude is over now, is that it?" Even while he was speaking, Julie knew Steve didn't believe what he was

saying. He held his jaw tight and spat the words out, building up his anger like a structure. She wanted to pull his head down, cradle it against her shoulder and croon soothing words.

Instead, she said, "No, Ethan didn't buy me this coat. I got the money by my own efforts." She kept her voice flat and void of emotion. "As a matter of fact, Ethan did ask me to marry him. Perhaps I even will. I don't know myself yet."

Steve stood up, started to speak, then turned to stare out at the water. She jumped down to hurry to the long table where the group had gathered for the farewell festivities.

Through tear-blinded eyes, she stared at his long, lean figure silhouetted against the sky. She watched him lean down, pick up the wine bottle, study it for a moment, then with an awkward, angry gesture pitch the bottle into the sea. It made a tiny, black dot against the blazing sunset before it fell.

It was late when they returned to the Casa Trilbi. Group members headed for their rooms to pack and be ready to leave in the morning. For once there were no messages or things for Julie to attend to. Steve passed her on the steps going to her room. His over-polite "Excuse me, please," hit her like a quick, sharp blow.

She opened the window and leaned out to wave good night to St. Francis before getting into bed to

lie awake, listening for the nightingale's love song. It never sang. And she lay awake, listening for a long time.

It was almost noon when Julie had seen the last of the group through airport security, customs, and the rigmarole of modern travel. She felt let down, deserted. They'd become friends, the grandparents Julie had never known. She smiled, remembering Lilianne's last words as she'd hugged her. "Be happy, girl. Life's a buffet. Try a bit of everything."

It felt odd to have them all gone. She wondered if Elinor had known that trip to the beauty shop would change more than just the color of her hair. She felt a sharp pang as she realized she'd never get a chance to ask.

The cab drove past the Michelangelo steps on the way back to Casa Trilbi. Impulsively Julie told the driver to let her out to climb the long, slanting stairway. At the top she turned to watch the churning mass of cars moving along the Corso. She'd grown used to Rome's traffic, yet it had been only two weeks since she'd come here the first time. She felt as if years had passed. What was it Lilianne had said? "Try a bit of everything." That's what Rome had been—a bit of everything.

She looked around at the measured perfection of the Capitoline Plaza, and the pretentious grandeur

of the Victor Immanuel monument beside it made her decide Michelangelo would have sneered at the "wedding cake." Softly, breathing the words more than speaking them, she said, "Okay, Mike, old boy. Like you, I came to Rome. Like you, I had my fling in the big city. Did you fall in love here too? Did you hurt too? Did you get over it?"

A faint smile appeared as she murmured, "I rode in a limousine. Even you didn't do that." Then the smile faded, and her words were almost a prayer. "Okay, Mike. Now it's back to work. I'll work as hard as you did. I'll never be as good as you were, but I'll work just as hard."

It was oddly quiet downstairs at the Casa Trilbi. In the dining room the waiters played cards at one of the many empty tables. Their voices sounded hollow and unnaturally loud. One looked up and waved as Julie passed. From her spot behind the desk, Mona called, "Hey, Julie, these are for you." She handed Julie a thick packet of envelopes. Every member of the group had left one. Some had long notes; some just said, "Thanks." All of them held money.

Astonished and bewildered, Julie sought Paul. "Am I supposed to give it to the chef and the waiters?"

Paul's smile was amused and mildly patronizing. "Julie, every single one of the group asked me what

you'd like as a gift. Every one of them wanted to give you something. You did a great job, Julie. Accept it—and enjoy. And don't for one minute think of it as insulting." He was gone before she could reply.

Carefully she made a neat packet of the letters and laid them at the bottom of her suitcase. The money she sealed in an envelope and tucked into the zipper pocket of her sketch bag, where it would be handy to take to the bank back in Florence tomorrow morning.

She was putting her new coat on the rack above her seat on the train when it struck her that she was carrying more money than she'd ever had at one time in all the while she'd been in Italy. Resolutely she took out paper and pen to make a list of art supplies she could afford to buy now. She told herself that as long as she was doing that, she wouldn't think of that other train ride two weeks ago.

She swore silently when her tears made blotches on the list, then blew her nose and made herself start a new one. Finally she gave up and let the tears flow, taking perverse satisfaction in the softly falling rain outside the window and in telling herself that heaven, too, was lonely.

Chapter Ten

When the little dots above the card slot on the student-entrance gate didn't light up to spell out "Enter," Julie assumed she'd made a mistake punching in her code numbers. She made a face and muttered at herself as she set her bag down to check the numbers inside her coat sleeve before she tried again. Still no welcoming green lights. She kept trying. After the fifth try she gave up. Frustrated and angry, she stuffed her card back into its little slot in her sketch bag and stomped off, muttering about stubborn computers that were smarter than she was.

Grim-faced, she bought an admission ticket at the main gate, opened her bag for the security check, and marched to the administration office. The woman at the reception desk did not look up when Julie marched in and planted herself in front of her. She glanced up sharply when Julie spoke.

"My name is Julie Cramer, and I want to see the man in charge of security."

The woman's eyes widened. "Yes, Miss Cramer. And he wants to see you too." She pressed buttons

on her phone, murmured quietly into it, listened for a moment, then hung up and said quietly, "If you'll come this way, please."

Julie followed her down the long palace corridor. The woman's high heels made clicking noises, and Julie's sneakers made solid little thuds as she walked. People scurried in and out of doorways, carrying papers or cartons of coffee. At the end of the hall, the woman stopped and pointed.

The door had no name or title; it was just a heavy wooden door, intricately carved as all doors were at the palace. As Julie put her hand out to open it, the woman gave her a long look and said softly, "Must say, I didn't expect to see you here. They didn't, either." Then she strode off and Julie moved through the door.

They were waiting for her. Two arms grabbed her, one on either arm, and a hand reached out and yanked her sketch bag from her. Efficient feminine hands patted down Julie's body. Too startled to make a sound, Julie's mouth opened and closed, gaping.

She was hustled, sputtering and fuming, across the room to stand before a scarred, old desk. Her bleating sounds of protest sounded absurd in her own ears.

"She's clean," one voice said.

"Nothing in the bag. Here's her card." As she said the last, the second woman put Julie's gate card into

the man's outstretched hand. Both moved back, leaving Julie to stand alone, waiting.

The man seated there ignored her. His eyes were intent on the screen of his desk computer. Julie stared at him, thinking wildly that he should be wearing a monk's cowl and holding a quill pen. His tonsured head and round face did not belong in the twentieth century. Then a sudden surge of indignation and rage swept through her. She snatched up his nameplate and banged it on the desk, shouting, "At least look at me!"

Deliberately, the man pressed the button to turn off the computer, straightened the nameplate, and leaned back to look up at her, his face bland, indifferent. His air of calculated boredom infuriated Julie.

"What's going on here? First I can't get in the gate, and then those two search me like a criminal. Are you the security man?" Julie heard the anger in her voice. It made her glad. She wanted to stay mad. As long as she was mad, she wouldn't be scared.

"Yes, I'm Geraldo Formi, in charge of security." His eyes moved to the nameplate on his desk when he spoke. His tone was dry, bored. He paused to study her, his eyes moving slowly from head to toe. Then he picked up a brown folder from his desk and read:

"Cramer, Julie Sims, born April 24, 1963, Felton, Iowa, U.S.A. Both parents deceased. Graduated Ox-

boro College, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A. Accepted at Florence Institute for training in painting and art restoration December 12, 1987. Institute security check completed January 18, 1988: entry card and key to workroom number 18 issued January 23, 1988. No security breaches noted.' ”

“You’re darn right, there’s no security breaches—and I want to know what’s going on! How come I can’t get in? What’s happened, for Pete’s sake? I’ve got a right to know.”

A faint smile disturbed his bored expression for a second. “How typically American. They always talk about their rights. Before we go into that, would you check to be sure these facts are correct?”

He handed her the folder, and she scanned the pages. Address, phone number, height, weight, health. She recognized her tidy printing. She’d filled out the form the day after she and Chris had agreed to share the flat. The same day she’d answered Chris’s ad for “English-speaking female to share rent and expenses.”

She nodded her head and handed back the folder.

“And are these your code numbers?” He turned the screen to show the numbers she’d been assigned for her gate card. She read them and again nodded her agreement.

“And the key to your workroom? Do you still have it?”

“Sure. It’s in my bag—the one they took. Look for yourself. It’s in the little zipper pocket on the side.”

“With your permission, I shall.” One of the women handed him the bag; he carefully unzipped the pocket and removed the key. With it, he pulled out the envelope filled with money from the Elderhostel group and the one containing her salary and painting money.

Suddenly she wished she hadn’t been so anxious to turn in her restoration project and get to work at the Academy. Wished she had taken time to go to the bank. The man counted the notes carefully and weighed them down with the nameplate. “Quite a tidy sum,” he said dryly.

“It’s mine, and you had no right to open it.” Desperately, Julie clung to her anger, tried to hang on to her fury. She lifted her chin and pulled herself tall. “I demand to know what’s going on.” She said each word precisely.

“All in good time. First, I’d like you to look at something.” He glanced at one of the waiting women and said, “The video, please,” his tone flat, indifferent. Without comment he turned the computer monitor to face Julie.

At the top of the gray screen she read: “23 March 1:32:43 A.M.” The second numbers changed as she watched. For several seconds the screen showed only a long, empty hall with closed doors on both sides.

Then a figure appeared, a woman. Her head was hidden under the hood of the coat she wore. Julie's gasp resounded in the silent room. The woman on the screen wore Julie's coat, the very coat Julie wore at that moment.

At the top of the screen, the numbers kept ticking off the seconds. Beneath them, the woman moved to door number 18 and stopped. With rapt, fascinated horror, Julie watched the figure on the screen reach into the coat pocket, pull something out, and open door number 18. As she turned the knob, neat white letters appeared below the time at the top of the screen. "Level D: Door # 18: assigned; Cramer, Julie S.: proper key: no alarm:"

Then the screen showed only an empty hall again. The door to number 18 was closed like all the others. The picture of one of the janitors appeared on the screen. He made a fist at the camera. Then an empty hall once more.

No one said anything. Julie stared at the videotape of an empty corridor, trying to understand. It had to be Chris. She knew the room number, knew where Julie kept her key, knew about the code numbers written on the sleeve. But why? What was she doing? Some kind of practical joke? It didn't make any sense. The seconds ticked away at the top of the screen; the only sound in the room was the tiny squeak of the man's chair.

The numbers read 1:38:22 when the door to number 18 opened again. Again the "Level D: Door # 18:" legend appeared at the top of the screen. But now the figure carried a large bag. The hood covered her head, and again she kept her face away from the camera. Clearly she knew she was being photographed.

The click when the man turned off the video sounded loud, and Julie jumped.

"Before you ask," he said, "gate computer records show that your card and your numbers were punched in at 1:24 A.M. of that date and out at 1:44. Again no alarm."

"Then what's the problem? Will someone please tell me what's going on?" There was neither anger nor indignation in her voice now. It was a plea, not a demand. Questions raced through her mind. Could Chris have deliberately used her card and key, knowing a breach of security would mean trouble for Julie? Why? What for? Why? *Why?* That word kept echoing in her head. It made no sense. Nothing made sense. She breathed deep, trying to still the trembling she felt within her.

"Bring Albans in, please," Formi said, "and bring a chair for her." He gestured toward Julie.

A young man in a wrinkled gray suit entered the room through a door behind the desk. His glance at Julie was impersonal, calculating. She tried to meet

it, but her eyes stopped at the package he carried. She knew, before he opened it, what was under the tidy brown wrapping.

"That's my Vasari, isn't it?" she said dully. No one replied.

The gray-suit man cut the string with the tiny scissors of a Swiss army knife and folded the paper neatly when he pulled it away. Without thinking, Julie reached to touch the spot where she'd had to match Vasari's yellow, wondering if it had dried smooth or left a ridge. The man jerked the painting away from her hand.

"This is Mr. Albans of Classic Gallery in New York," Formi said formally. "Will you tell us exactly what brought you here, Mr. Albans? Begin at the beginning, please."

Albans nodded, took a breath, and began speaking. His voice never varied in pitch, and the words came out in weary little spurts. "Last Monday I got a call. Woman's voice. Said she represented Travelers' Gallery in Florence. I've done business with that gallery before. Strictly legit. Woman said she had an original Vasari. From a private collection. Family wanted a private sale. Guaranteed original."

He paused for a second to look appraisingly at the painting before he continued. "I bought it over the phone, had my bank handle the exchange. Took delivery on Wednesday. Messenger service. Before I

called my client, I checked the Institute catalog. Just a fluke. I usually don't. Saw the painting listed in the catalog. That meant my painting was either a reproduction"—he looked again at the painting—"a darn good one, or it's an original. Not sure which."

He stopped talking and stood looking expectant, like a child waiting for his grade after an oral book report.

Formi's voice now was sharp, crisp, no longer bored. "Mr. Albans' call was logged in at. . . ." He glanced at his notes. "Ten-twenty P.M., Florence time. That would be four-twenty P.M. in New York. A nightwatchman took the message. I returned his call at. . . ." Again he referred to his notes. "Eight twenty-seven A.M., Florence time. That would be two twenty-seven A.M. in New York. Mr. Albans caught a Saturday flight from New York and arrived here in Florence yesterday. We met here in my office. Is that an accurate account, Mr. Albans?"

"Yes, sounds right."

"Bring Mr. Albans a chair, please."

One of the women pushed another chair up, and he sat down. Julie kept her eyes on the painting, while the men's words repeated themselves in her brain. An icy knot of fear formed somewhere deep within her, still buried and frozen and contained. She forced herself to look at Formi when he picked up his notes and read from them.

"Institute records show the painting was checked out to Julie Sims Cramer for restoration on January fifth. Unreturned as of yesterday's date. Review of the video scanner of Cramer's workroom showed an entry late that Sunday night—actually early Monday morning—the twenty-third of March." He laid the paper down and looked at Julie. "The video you just saw."

"But I wasn't even in Florence. I've been in Rome, working. Just got back yesterday. Call the Casa Trilbi in Rome. That's where I was staying." She wondered if they could hear the relief in her voice.

"Yes, we knew that. We did. The desk clerk at the Casa Trilbi told us you didn't return with the group that day. We also talked to the director, a man named"—he glanced at his notes—"Paul Prince. He said you stayed in Orvieto to take the four-thirty train to Florence." He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing, his voice soft, hissing. "That puts you in Florence on that day, not in Rome."

"But I missed the train. I never left Orvieto. There was a rail strike that day, remember? I couldn't get back to Rome."

"The train strike began at six P.M. The Florence train left Orvieto at four-thirty. It's true, you couldn't get back to Rome, but you weren't in Orvieto, were you, Julie Cramer?"

Julie felt a tiny tremor begin in her knees. It

seemed to creep upward. She told herself it was absurd. She'd done nothing wrong. So why did she feel guilty? Sound guilty?

"I missed the train," she repeated. "I got busy sketching and lost track of time."

"Oh? You got busy sketching? What sketch would be so interesting that you would miss a train?"

"It was of a little girl. In front of the church. She was holding a chicken. A pet chicken," she added lamely.

"A pet chicken?" His smile did not reassure her.

"Yes, a white one. She had black hair. I liked the sharp contrast." Julie told herself to shut up. It sounded sillier with every word.

"I see." He thought a second. Then, "Will you show us the sketch, please?"

"I can't. I gave it to the girl."

"Really? How convenient." The words were a sneer, not a comment.

Albans broke in. "Look, I'm not interested in whether she took the painting or someone else did. What I need to know is whether it's a reproduction or the original. Paid a lot of money for a legitimate original. Want nothing to do with a stolen masterpiece."

He paused to glare at Julie before going on. "Formi, you said they have an expert on the staff of the Academy. Will you please get the guy in here?"

I'm beat." He turned to give Julie an appraising look. "For what it's worth, she's either the stupidest thief in the world—or pretty slick. Brazen it out. Show up complaining the lock's been changed. Neat trick," he commented casually.

"But I didn't come to Florence that day. Don't you see? It isn't me on that screen. It's someone pretending to be me—wearing my coat. Look at the other tapes of me—I never put the hood up." Julie heard the desperation in her voice. "It's all circumstantial. Some kind of sick joke or something."

"Strange the way all the circumstances add up, isn't it? A gate entry with your code numbers? A key that fits your door? A painting that you've restored? Envelopes filled with money? If Albans hadn't called, no one would have checked on the painting. Seems odd, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does." Her voice was flat, dull, resigned. With conscious effort she made herself sound rational, matter-of-fact. "In the first place, why would I tell everyone I was going to Florence if I planned to steal a painting? That's stupid. I could have sneaked up here a dozen times without saying anything. And why would I carry envelopes of cash if they weren't legitimate? That would be stupid too. There's no way I can prove I wasn't in Florence on that Sunday night. I wish I could, but I can't."

"Look, let's get on with it, shall we? I'm still

caught up in jet lag, and this is getting us nowhere. When will your expert get here? The one who can let us know exactly what we're talking about here." Albans sounded weary and put-upon. He clumped across the room and plopped down on the narrow leather couch against the wall, the painting firmly in his arms.

"Send Mr. Kerns in as soon as he arrives," Formi barked into his telephone.

The name didn't register at first. When it did, Julie began to shake. Until she heard Steve's name, she'd made herself think of it as some absurd form of nightmare. A zany dream. She'd managed to keep the icy knot of fear buried, solid and frozen, deep inside her. Until they said Steve's name it had all been unreal.

Suddenly it was very real. Steve would come in. He'd tell them the painting was genuine. And they'd tell him she was a thief—and she'd have to sit here and watch his face while they told him. "Please, do I have to be here when Mr. Kerns comes?" Her voice quavered, tinny with fear. She tucked her hands beneath her to conceal their trembling.

Formi didn't bother to answer. He looked at his watch and went back to the report on his desk. The minutes ticked on. It seemed a physical thing, as if the lump of icy fear were melting, sending tiny rivulets of panic all through her. Numbly she noticed her

hands had escaped. They no longer shook, just lay limp in her lap.

She sat, resigned, mute, stony. In her mind she saw Steve as he'd looked yesterday—hurt, angry. She hoped he wouldn't say anything about their time in Rome. It would hurt him at the Academy. Dully she accepted that her chance at the Academy was gone now. She wondered why that didn't seem to matter much. Resigned, she closed her eyes and let the waves of fear and despair wash over her, not bothering to wipe away the tears that made shiny, wet paths down her cheeks.

Formi and Albans both went to meet Steve when he came, Albans still carrying the painting. Steve's tone was pleasant, sure, faintly condescending when he spoke. "This is the painting in question?"

Both men nodded.

Steve moved to the window, pulled a powerful flashlight from his back pocket, and directed its beam on the painting. Inch by inch he scrutinized it, then turned off the flashlight and turned around. "It's an authentic Vasari. Been recently restored—good job of cleaning and restoring. See where the yellow has been blended here? Good work, clearly a restoration. Not one of Vasari's best works. Most likely belongs to the Institute. Not a great painting, but genuine." He handed it back to Albans. Turning to Formi, he asked, "What's going on?"

As he spoke, he saw Julie. For a second he simply stared at her slight, forlorn figure slumped in a chair at the other end of the room. He moved quickly to where he could see her face. She met his eyes, hers blank and apathetic, careful to register no recognition.

"Why is she here? What's she got to do with this?" Steve's voice was hard, the words clipped, brittle.

Formi spoke rapidly. "The painting was taken from the Institute last Sunday—actually about one-thirty A.M., so it was a Monday." He paused, nodded toward Julie and went on. "We have every reason to believe it was taken by Miss Cramer here. The evidence points in that direction."

Julie glanced up, her face gray beneath the spatter of freckles, her eyes dark green, shiny with tears, her mouth twisted with humiliation.

"Fortunately Albans spotted the theft and—"

"There is no way Miss Cramer could have taken that painting," Steve broke in on Formi quietly. His blunt tone made them seem loud.

"And how can you be so sure, Mr. Kerns?" Formi sounded genuinely curious.

"Because Julie Cramer was with me all night. We'd been to Orvieto. I knew she was a student at the Academy, so I had to keep it all professional while we were in Rome. I asked her to wait in Orvieto and tell the rest that she was going up to Florence. I bor-

rowed Paul's car, drove back to Orvieto. There's no way she could have slipped off that night."

He stopped talking for a moment, to allow time for all the implications of his words.

Julie leaped to her feet, all apathy gone. Her shout surprised her. "That's not true! He's making that up. It's not true. Don't believe him. I didn't even see him that night. He never picked me up in Orvieto. He's lying."

Formi looked squarely at Steve, then at Julie, his head turning from one to the other. He spoke quietly, his tone deadly serious. "Kerns, you're on the staff of the Academy. You know what you're doing, I assume?" He paused, looked steadily at Steve. "Are you sure that what you're saying is the truth? You understand what you are doing?" He waited again, put his hand up when Steve started to answer. "Take a moment to be sure you're not making a mistake. Be sure you understand what you're doing."

"Yes, I know what I'm doing. I understand fully." Steve gave Julie a maddening little smile and turned to Formi. "She's just trying to protect me. I told her when we left Orvieto that she mustn't let anyone know about it. She promised, and she's trying to keep that promise. But I can't let her get blamed for something like this just to protect me."

"I'm not protecting him! He's making it all up!" Julie shouted.

All three turned to smile at her, the patronizing smiles of men dealing with a foolish woman. Julie wanted to shake them, stamp her feet. Helpless, she sat down, clamped her mouth shut, and listened.

"Mr. Kerns, no one at the Academy would make such an admission if it were not true. Ergo, I must agree that Miss Cramer here was not the thief." He glanced at her and went on. "Actually, none of us really believed she was guilty."

Julie stifled her impulse to snarl when he said that.

"I'll need your signed statement, please," Formi told Steve, "and you do realize, of course, that a copy will be sent to the directors of the Academy?" Steve nodded. "Then if you'll go in there and dictate your statement to my secretary and sign it, there's no need for you to stay any longer." He gestured, and one of the security women moved to his side.

Steve looked at Julie, started to say something, then turned and followed the woman through the door behind the desk.

Formi turned to Albans, his voice crisp, authoritative. "Mr. Albans, you heard the owner of Travelers' Gallery. He denies any knowledge that your check was deposited in the gallery account. I'm inclined to believe him. He's agreed to refund your money. I imagine you're anxious to attend to that."

"What about plane fare and my time? I bought what I thought was a legitimate painting from a legit-

imate gallery. I do the honest thing, and I'm out the money."

"Maybe Institute insurance will cover the cost of returning a painting. You could try. Leave the painting here, and one of the people in the office will give you the insurance forms."

Formi dismissed Albans with a wave, and the second security woman moved to escort the dealer through the same rear door. Formi waited until he heard the solid click of the door's closing before turning his attention to Julie.

"Now, Miss Cramer, we talked at some length with Ethan West yesterday. He denied any knowledge of either the painting or the money from the attempted sale. As I told Mr. Albans, I'm inclined to believe him." He stood up and walked over to the windows, his hands clasped behind his back, staring out at the green splendor of the palace gardens. He opened the window, letting in a gust of cold air and the sound of a power mower.

"If you believed him, why did you make a big thing about my money?" Julie was surprised at how normal she sounded. Her blunt, matter-of-fact tone pleased her, and she went on. "Speaking of my money, I assume it's all right for me to take it back now." Without waiting for his response, she scooped up the neat stack and stuffed it into her bag.

Formi closed the window and turned to face her.

"If you'll think back, I only said it was a tidy sum. I didn't say it was illegal." He crossed the room to lean against his desk, arms folded across his chest. His tone was thoughtful, as if he were leading a seminar. "Now we are left with a problem. From the first I considered it unlikely that you were the thief. But it was clear that she, the thief, is someone whom you know. Know well. In time, under pressure, you would have told us who she is."

Julie started to protest, then thought of her fear, how quickly panic had overwhelmed her, and said nothing.

Softly, as though making casual conversation, Formi went on. "Mr. Kerns's revelation has removed that pressure—at considerable cost to himself. That leaves us with the question of who the thief is—or was." He leaned forward, his face close to Julie's, his eyes wary, accusing. "She wore *your* coat?"

Julie nodded, swallowing.

"Used your card and key?"

Another nod.

"Well?"

"Look, Mr. Formi, you can keep me here all day. I don't *know* who the thief is, and I won't make accusations until I do." Julie hoped she sounded firm and full of resolve, hoped he wouldn't realize how defeated and fragile she felt.

He tilted his head, half smiling. "In your American

movies, I believe they call this a standoff. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Okay. Go on home. Since the painting has been returned unharmed, I doubt the directors will want to pursue the matter. If they do, they'll know where to find you. They'll have to decide what to do about the security breach."

As she opened the door to leave, he said, "Let me know when you *know* something, okay?"

Julie realized he'd seen through her choice of words. It was true. She didn't *know* Chris was the person in the video. She wondered if she'd have resisted if Formi had offered to drop the security-breach business. What would she have said then? Would she have abandoned friendship for a chance at the Academy?

She pushed that thought back. She wanted it to be untrue. Wanted desperately for that thought to be wrong. Wanted it almost as much as she wanted Steve to retract the statement he was probably signing at that moment.

Steve was waiting at the main gate when Julie came through it. He grabbed her arm. "Where in blazes do you live? I've been running around checking every door in this blasted place, scared I'd miss you—and

I don't even know your dumb address." His voice was thick, harsh with frustration.

She looked at him—a long, amused look, her mouth twitching faintly.

"Drove me nuts," he added more quietly, taking her hand. They had walked a few paces before a rich chortle escaped him and he said, "There I go again—leaping on my horse and riding off in all directions." His smile was sheepish, his laughter contagious.

Suddenly both were laughing, great merry peals of laughter that made the tourists smile as they filed into the palace and startled the pigeons squatting on the old duke's statue.

Their laughter ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and without a word they clung together, arms wrapped around each other, her head nestled in his shoulder. Their kiss ended only when the hoots of the street urchins became too loud to ignore.

He smiled as he released her, saying, "Now you have to marry me. Make an honest man of me."

She didn't answer. She wanted to shout her relief that now it was out of her hands. He'd done it. She'd tried to stop him. At the same time some deep-down voice inside her told her that it wasn't that simple.

"Come on. Let's get some coffee or something," she said, taking his arm, savoring the joy of his nearness, the sheer pleasure of matching her stride to his as they climbed the long hill of the Boboli Garden.

Steve headed for the counter of the tiny café to buy hot chocolate, and Julie joined the tourists seated at tables on the terrace. She'd never been here before; the Garden café was too expensive for students. She put out her hand to take a cup from the tray Steve carried back. He pulled the tray away and set it on the other side of the table.

"First. Here's my address and phone number." He handed her a small note paper and kept another in his hand. "Give me your address. No food or drink until it's written down and stashed in my wallet." Steve sat down, pen in hand, squinting in the mid-morning sun.

"It's 27 Via Catarina—in the old city—three flights up. Says C. Eberhart on the door. My roommate—ex-roommate. Now can I have some chocolate?"

"Nope. Phone number first."

"641 47 83 2. Now?"

"Drink up." They sipped rich, hot chocolate, looked up to smile, gazed out across the thousands of red-tiled roofs of medieval houses, watched the jet stream of a pair of planes make two white lines like chalk on a bright-blue slate.

"Steve. . . ."

"Julie. . . ."

Both spoke at once.

He stopped and said, "You first."

“Okay. First. How did you know I *hadn’t* taken that painting? You noticed I’d bought a new coat. Didn’t you wonder how I paid for it?”

“Yeah, I wondered. Figured it was none of my business—yet.” He paused to drink from the cup he held, then went on. “How did I know? Because you could never steal a work of art. You love it too much.” He tipped the cup back to drain the last drop of chocolate, set it back onto its saucer, leaned his chin on his hand, and looked square at Julie. “Maybe, if the need were great enough—say a starving kid, or something—you might steal food. But a work of art—never. Don’t ask *how* I know. I just do. It’s like gravity. I don’t understand it, but I know it’s there.” His tone was casual, relaxed, sure.

She swallowed the last of her chocolate before she replied. When she did, her voice was thoughtful, “For what it’s worth, you’re right. I can’t see myself stealing. Never thought of it before. But why, Steve? If you *knew* I hadn’t taken it, why did you do it?” Without intending to, she reached to touch his hand, trace the line from wrist to thumb, feel the vibrant strength of him.

His hand covered hers, and his other arm reached around to pull her close against him. For a few seconds they simply sat, lost in the happiness of sitting close on a sunlit morning atop the splendor of the beautiful, old garden. Then she looked up at him and

said softly, "You haven't answered my question. Why, Steve?"

His smile was rueful. "Well, when I saw you sitting there, you looked so scared, so browbeaten. I had to do something to get that whipped-puppy look off your face. Say something. Something so outlandish they'd have to believe me. So I said the first thing that came into my head." He paused to grin and fake an evil leer before he added, "Just wish it had been true."

With a quick movement he pulled her to her feet, drew her to him, and held her tight. His kiss was fierce, like an explosion. When they pulled apart, his tone was defiant, almost belligerent. "Okay. It was rash and foolish. I admit it. But, darn it, Julie, it worked. And I'd do it again."

His words carried clearly, and a tourist at another table looked up sharply. He grinned and waved at the woman, and she smiled back. They could feel her eyes on them as they started down the hill.

"Steve, I think we should talk. There are a lot of things—"

Steve pressed his fingers against Julie's lips. "You're right, of course. Lots of things we'll have to decide. But not now. Not today. Today I want to take my girl on a real date. Be a tourist. Sightsee. Enjoy being us. Julie and Steve."

He took her hand to interlace his fingers with hers and swing their arms as children do. Humming softly

and nodding to strangers, they strolled down the worn path through the garden. They wandered between green hedges on wide, pebbled paths through the structured beauty of the old garden. The formal, ordered, classic designs were like listening to Bach. Nothing jarred.

She let herself wallow in euphoria. Pushed all doubts and troublesome thoughts far back and basked in the joy of being with Steve, walking beside him with nothing between them but love and tenderness. Later, tomorrow perhaps, they'd be sensible, rational, think about the future. For now there was only the splendor and the sense of release. Julie simply let go and allowed happiness to wash over her. That was enough for today.

"Know what I'd love?" she asked as they made their way across the square.

"Me, I hope. What else?"

"Well, ever since I've been in Florence, I've heard about Fiesole. One of the guys at class was always talking about taking his girl there. Said it's the perfect spot for lovers." She smiled, suddenly shy.

"Perfect. You drop your stuff off at your place, and I'll get tickets and meet you at the bus station. If we hurry, we can make the one-thirty bus." He flagged down a cab, handed the driver some bills, and bundled her into it before she could respond.

Back at home she hurried upstairs, stowed her bag

away, and turned to run down again. She caught a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror and stopped dead still. *He deserves better*, she told her reflection. Swiftly she pulled off boots and jeans and sweatshirt. Carefully but quickly she cleaned her face, redid her makeup, and brushed her hair into a shiny halo around her face. Her white skirt and ruffled blouse looked fresh, even pretty, but dull.

An impish smile lit her face as Julie wound the brilliant scarf Elinor had given her around her waist, then whirled to make the skirt billow beneath the colorful sash. Pleased, she snatched her green coat from its hanger and skimmed down the stairs to the waiting cab.

Tickets in hand, Steve was waiting at the door of the bus. She loved the way his face lit up when he saw her, the proud way he handed her up the steps, the way his eyes fastened on her, just as hers did on him. She found it hard to pay attention to the views.

And they deserved attention. Yesterday's rain had washed all the world, leaving the leaves shiny and the soil black. The road wound between splendid villas and country houses on one side and the city on the other. The tile roofs of Florence gleamed orange, and on the horizon the bell tower and the Duomo were outlined against the blue of the sky.

Tall cypresses made dark-green lines marking the boundaries of groves of round, gray olive trees that

surrounded the villas. Men on mud-spattered tractors looked up to wave as the bus passed. Julie wondered if the sunlight really was more golden than usual, or was it simply joy that made it seem brighter? Were the colors of Tuscany more vivid, the air sweeter, the flowers more fragrant?

When the bus stopped, they made their way through the cobblestone streets to the piazza. Steve spotted a tiny restaurant, gave Julie a questioning glance, and opened the door when she nodded. It was dark inside; for a few seconds they stood blinking, trying to locate the source of the voice that welcomed them.

When their eyes adjusted, they followed the gnomelike figure to a table. He put a basket of bread before them; Julie breathed in the fresh-baked smell and realized she was ravenous. The minestrone was wonderful, thick, rich with garlic. They smiled over steaming bowls, too hungry for talk. The waiter smiled as he took their bowls, accepting their compliments complacently.

He returned in a few seconds, leading a tiny woman, dressed in black, whom he introduced as the cook and his wife. With the unstudied arrogance of a true aristocrat, she accepted their praise, conferred a smile on them, and took her husband's arm to lead him across the room. Julie stared at the two of them,

unconsciously posed beneath tattered old banners that hung on the stone walls.

Steve glanced at Julie and quietly handed her the blank side of the large cardboard menu. She worked feverishly, straining to catch the proud lift of the man's head, the patrician dignity of the woman's profile, the grace of their gnarled, workworn hands.

Steve sat silent beside her, his eyes following her work. When the pair moved off to the kitchen, he said, "You should call it 'Etruscans of the twentieth century.' It's good. But you know that."

"I hope so. Maybe they'd like it. Think so?"

"They probably would, but I'm not going to ask. I want it. I want to hang it above my desk, next to my print of ancient-tomb paintings. Only the clothes are different—the faces haven't changed."

He was too intent on the sketch to notice Julie's face as he spoke. For a few seconds the problems she'd put aside flashed through her brain, bringing with them the sick realization of what this morning had meant. Steve would have no desk, no wall to hang the sketch on. She'd probably be tossed out because of security. With a quick toss of her curls, she pushed the thought away and raised her glass.

"To us, the lovers of the world."

Their eyes met as their glasses touched. Wordless, they set the glasses on the table and brought their lips

together, meeting in a pledge too solemn to find expression in words.

Later they strolled through the old city and made their way to the worn path by the river. Sunset gleamed bronze on the Arno; scullers ruffled the flat surface of the water. Their oars made black scratches on the horizon when they lifted them from the water. Steve and Julie spoke idly or were silent, both content, both adrift in the gentle magic of being together and being in love.

Back at her apartment, Julie bustled with salad and table setting, while Steve chopped and minced and seasoned the marinara sauce. "I usually don't allow anyone in the kitchen while I'm cooking," he told her, "but I'll make an exception in your case."

After dinner they lingered at the table, watching the sliver of moon slide up the sky, almost too faint to see above the lights of the city. Often their hands brushed together, and they turned to each other for lazy, leisurely embraces. Julie watched the play of shadows on the hollows of his face, reached up to run her fingers along the ridge of his brows. Without intending to, her voice dreamy and soft, she said, "Why did you do it, Steve?" Vaguely she wished she hadn't asked, had not chanced spoiling the gentle perfection of the moment.

"Do what?"

"Say what you said this morning."

"We've been over that, Julie. I told you. Seemed like a good idea at the time. For that matter, why did you turn me down when I asked you to marry me?"

"I listened at the window when you were talking to Paul that morning. You know, the morning after we went to Orvieto. I had to say no. Can't you see that?" He started to speak, but she held up her hand. "No. Let me finish. I didn't want us to end up hating each other out of guilt or resentment. I didn't then. I still don't."

"But now it's not a question of guilt or resentment. It's done. I may have done a stupid thing. But I did it. Guilt and resentment are not what are important. What's important is that you love me."

"You're right, I guess. They're not. And I love you. But. . . ." Her voice trailed away as she sought for words. She felt his eyes and looked away. "It's me, Steve. It's like I'm driven. Like there's something inside me that's more important than anything. Even you, Steve."

The words spewed out in quick little bursts. She made herself look directly at his face. He was frowning, the little line by his mouth deep and sharp. "I wouldn't have done that for you, Steve. Lots of times I hate this 'gift' that drives me, but I can't lie. I wouldn't give it up for anything—not even you. I wouldn't—couldn't—have done what you did. Give

up my chance at the Academy to rescue you—I couldn't do it."

The words seemed wrung from her. Her voice quavered with her desperate effort to make him understand. She hated what she was saying and hated the knowledge that it was true. Wryly she added, "Of course, they may force me to leave anyway. But I'd never just give it up."

"So? Maybe you won't have to give it up. They might let you stay, after a suitable amount of careful persuasion. They know talent when they see it. So what's the problem?"

"Like I said, it's me. Steve, this morning, when that Formi guy was going at me, when I thought they might arrest me or something, I was ready to tell them it was Chris. I'd have made an accusation like that without even talking to her first, just to protect myself. I'd have thrown her to the wolves, Steve."

"But you didn't, did you?"

"No. I didn't, but only because you came and got me out of it." She spoke slowly now, the words measured, careful, her voice soft, controlled. "Steve, I love you. I love you enough to want you to have the best. That's not me, Steve. You deserve better. You deserve someone who'll put you first, before any talent or 'gift.' When I think of you in there, a modern-day Galahad rushing to rescue his lady, I want to cry, it's

so sweet and wonderful. You deserve more, don't you see that?"

"I see plenty. I see that you're doing it again. You told me that day on the train about how if you didn't have to struggle for something, you wouldn't value it. You have to feel guilty. You major in guilt. What's worse is that you think of your God-given talent as some burden you're stuck with. You feel guilty about using it." He spoke quietly, the words spilling out fast; he never took his eyes off her face. She opened her mouth to protest. He put up his hand.

"You said you sometimes hate the gift that drives you. That's just plain stupid. Your talent is a part of you. The drive to use it is part of that talent. I don't have a struggle accepting that. You do. If you want to create problems for yourself, I can't stop you. If it gives you some sort of satisfaction to wallow in guilt, go ahead and do it. Just don't expect me to stay around and watch and applaud you for it." He stood up and was at the door before she could speak.

She watched him clump down the stairs, back stiff, the menu-back sketch in one hand, the other hand jammed into his pocket. Twice she opened her mouth to call him back. Twice she closed it. He didn't look back. She didn't call him. She couldn't think of anything to say.

Moving mechanically, Julie closed and locked the door. She moved to the littered table and sat there,

pushing crumbs into tiny mounds. She saw her reflection in the hall mirror and automatically noted the angle of her head and the shadow pattern it made on the white cloth. *That's what despair looks like*, the artist within her observed. Robotlike, she got pad and charcoal, adjusted the mirror for a better view, and resumed the pose she'd noted.

While her eyes observed and her hands moved, she kept up a steady stream of advice, as if she were reading the words. *If you make yourself work, you won't fall apart. Don't think of anything but what you see. Catch the slack line of the lips. Try to get that vacant look of the eyes. That numbness. Get it on paper. Don't let yourself think about why the eyes are vacant. Just work. As long as you're working, you'll be okay.*

While she worked, unheeding, the moon disappeared behind the horizon, and the ancient bell in the tower clanged out the hours. Finally, stiff and spent, she stumbled to bed, too weary to undress or even turn out the light. Curled up under the blankets, she slept, too exhausted for dreams or tears.

She awoke to the bright, yellow glare of sunlight and reality. The sharp stab of pain when she thought of Steve startled her. Deliberately she made herself remember his words, made herself recall each detail of yesterday. Made herself examine the piercing hurt of this break with Steve as if it were an actual bone that required setting. Eventually the searing hurt be-

came a manageable, aching lump inside her, a bruise to be endured.

The apartment felt odd without Chris. She hadn't had time to notice before. She stood at the door of Chris's room, aware for the first time of how large it was. No clutter on the big bureau, no shoes strewn on chair and floor, no watercolors tacked on the wall. No Chris.

She wasn't ready to think of Chris yet, didn't want to face that truth. Instead, she cleared the table, washed and dried the dishes, scoured the sink, polished the furniture. She told herself she was not calling Chris because of the time difference. After she'd washed the windows and scrubbed the bathroom, she ran out of things to do.

The maid answered, just as she always had when Chris had called home. She asked who was calling, and Julie wondered vaguely what to do if Chris refused to speak with her.

"Well, the conquering Roman has returned." Chris sounded as if she were smiling as she spoke.

"Yeah, I'm back. Got a few problems." There was no smile in Julie's voice. It sounded flat. "You knew there would be. Why, Chris? Why did you do that?"

"Exactly what are you referring to, Julie? Let's be a bit more specific."

As Chris spoke, Julie could picture her, the lovely

blond head tilted to one side, the look of gentle condescension on her face.

“Breaking into my cell at the Institute. Wearing my coat. Stealing the Vasari I restored. Why, Chris?”

“You really don’t know, do you?”

“No. I really don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Oh, Julie, you little dope! You get yourself accepted at the Academy. Your pictures sell the first week you show them. You steal my boyfriend. Then you ask me why I want to get even. Are you really that stupid, or is it just a cover? Part of your mousy-misfit-from-Iowa pose?” The venom in Chris’s voice startled Julie.

Vaguely, as if they were two other people, Julie thought, *She hates me. Chris actually hates me. No one has ever hated me before. I’ve never been that important to anyone.*

Aloud she said, “Yes, I’m really that stupid. I really thought we were friends. In my dull Iowa fashion I cared about you. I wanted you to get accepted at the Academy. I can’t help it that you weren’t.” A sudden thought hit her, and her voice was hard when she went on. “That reminds me, Chris. Were you by any chance the student who got an instructor named Marco thrown off the Academy staff?”

“How’d you hear about that? That was way back in January.”

“Did you?”

"Darn right I did. The clown said I didn't care enough. Didn't have my heart in it. The jerk! But that's water over the dam—nothing to do with you."

"I suppose you're right. Okay, Chris, let's get to the truth, shall we? You must have planned this. When you lent me your suede coat to wear in Rome, was that so you could have mine? So you could see my security-gate code numbers I had written inside the sleeve?"

"You got it."

"That was right after the people who were supposed to buy your watercolors came back—and didn't buy them. Liked my work instead. Right?" Julie waited for Chris's answer. None came, so Julie went on. "The same night when you found out I'd been accepted at the Academy. Right?" Still no reply. "Did you plan to steal the Vasari from the beginning?"

"No. At first I was going to wreck it." Chris heard Julie's gasp and hurried on. "No slashing or anything like that. Just mess up your restoration, make sure Fermini would be so mad you'd never get in the Academy. That was before Ethan went down to Rome. Before you took Ethan from me too."

"Chris, that was—" Julie stopped. What was it? Disloyal? Dishonest?

Chris made a snorting sound, half laughter, half anger. "Whatever it was, he came back all agog over

the new Julie. Said it was a good thing I was leaving Florence.” She waited a second, then said flatly, “Ethan dumped me. *Me*. Chris Eberhart. Didn’t even ask me to leave my work in his stupid gallery when I left.”

Julie tried to picture Chris’s lovely, delicate mouth, her fragile beauty. They did not fit the matter-of-fact voice as Chris went on:

“I planned it so you’d be in town and no questions asked. Didn’t want anyone suggesting it wasn’t you. Figured I’d go there between six and six-thirty, then come home and give you back your coat.”

Dully Julie remembered Chris saying she would be out for a little while when they’d talked on the phone.

Chris’s voice droned on, half amused, half bored. “I went to the station that Sunday when you were supposed to come up. Watched for you there. You didn’t come. I went home. For a while I couldn’t think what to do. Then I figured, why not take the painting, sell it in New York, and leave you to explain what happened to it? How did you, by the way? I assume you’re not in jail.”

“The New York dealer checked the Institute catalog, saw it was stolen, and called the Institute. He brought the painting back.” She paused for a second to swallow hard before going on. “A friend vouched for my whereabouts that night, so they let me go.” Then, dryly, she continued, “For what it’s worth,

Chris, I didn't tell them I recognized you on the video. I didn't want to believe it."

Chris laughed, a merry little trill, like an actress. "Julie, how typical! You couldn't be satisfied with just being a better artist. You had to have friendship too. Just being accepted at the Academy wasn't enough, was it? You had to show me up at the gallery too.

"Do you know what it feels like to be jealous, Julie? Have you any concept? Did you ever stop to think what it's like to live with someone like you? To watch you? Listen to you? Envy you?"

Suddenly Chris was sobbing. "And you don't even appreciate it! You stupid, blind fool! Why you? Why should you be the lucky one? *Why?* You took it all for granted, never questioned it, just accepted your talent as if it were nothing. Acted as if it were some burden you were stuck with!" Her words came in jerks between sobs and gulps, and her voice was high and quivery.

"Chris, I . . . Chris, don't cry. I—"

"You what? You want me to say I'm sorry? No way, Julie," Chris said flatly. Then she said coldly, "Julie, don't you honestly know how much I envy you? Always envied you? Didn't you know that?"

"No, Chris. I didn't."

"Funny. I think I believe you. You actually didn't know." Chris said these words softly, a tone of won-

der in her voice. Then, “*You’re a gifted artist! And you’re too blind and stupid to be grateful!*” Chris was screaming as she slammed the receiver down.

Julie stood quietly, the phone still in her hand, remembering the evening she’d told Chris about the Academy. Julie had seen only their faces, Chris’s beauty, her own dowdiness. Now Chris had told her she was blind. Was she? She’d think more about that later, after she’d talked to Ethan.

He answered on the first ring. When he recognized Julie’s voice, he sounded frantic and furious. “For heaven’s sake, Julie, *don’t* call me! Don’t come near the shop. I don’t know what’s going on, and I don’t want to know. But why did you have to bring me into it? What did I ever do to you?”

Julie tried to break in, but he rushed on, his words tumbling out in a torrent. “Sunday, the security guy at the Institute had me in his office for two hours because the gallery, *my* gallery, was implicated in some theft. He kept asking how well I knew you. I told him you were only an artist-client. Said we hardly knew each other. I don’t know what’s going on, and I don’t want to know.”

“You think I stole a painting, don’t you, Ethan? You actually believe I took it.”

“I don’t know what I think. None of it makes any sense. Just do me a favor, will you? Stay away from the gallery until this all blows over. Doesn’t make

sense that you'd steal a painting. But I can't afford to be logical. Not till this flap dies down."

"You're quite safe, Ethan. I won't trouble you again." Julie didn't bother to say good-bye, just put the phone back onto its cradle very carefully. What had she expected? Loyalty? He'd never mentioned loyalty or trust. Just as he'd never mentioned love.

Carefully, as if any jarring movement would break her dazed calm, Julie pulled out the yellow paper with Steve's phone number and dialed. A woman answered.

"Is Stephen Kerns there?"

"No. He's gone away."

"Who are you?"

"I'm his cleaning lady. Who's calling?"

"Did he say when he'd be back?"

"No. Just said he'd be going out of town. Is there a message?"

"Do you know where he went?"

"I'm just his cleaning lady, not his mother. Who's this?"

"Julie."

"Julie who?"

"Never mind. Sorry to have bothered you." She didn't think to replace the phone, just stood there. What had she expected? That Steve would be sitting at home waiting for her to call him? He'd said, "Don't expect me to stay around. . . ."

The buzzing of the phone broke through her stupor. She replaced it and turned to stare out the window. The dome of the Duomo made a shiny red ball above the other roofs. The green and red tiles around the red center reminded her of the leaves and lace around a bridesmaid's bouquet. "Michelangelo would have hated that," she said grimly.

Even as she was saying his name, Julie was pulling on her coat to run to the place she loved most in all of Florence. Betrayed, rejected, and utterly bereft, Julie sought refuge in her private haven, the house where Michelangelo had lived and painted and died.

Chapter Eleven

The man selling tickets at 70 Via Ghibellina recognized Julie, though he stared at her new hair color. She didn't stop to visit with the attendants as she usually did, but went directly to the room Michelangelo had used as a studio. Once there, she squatted before a cabinet to study the door. He'd painted its flat surface as if it were a bureau drawer left half open by someone in a hurry. He'd painted a messy drawer, a jumble of rulers, wood blocks, odd pieces of wood, a protractor, and a miniature picture in a wooden frame.

As always, Julie was awed by Michelangelo's genius for detail. She studied it carefully, thinking, *One drawer, painted on one half of one door of one wall of one room—only he would see it. Yet he made it perfect. He cared that much.* She put out her hand to touch the tiny painting, then drew it back quickly when the lady attendant coughed loudly. She lost track of time squatting there, hunched over, gazing at one tiny painting in a painted drawer of an old cupboard door.

She felt oddly calm, rational, and attentive when she straightened and made her way to the other rooms of the old house. She stood beside the table with the model of the Sistine, not really looking at it, wondering how Michelangelo had dealt with people like Chris. She thought of Nora Hedinger's remark about his paying dearly for his gift.

Suddenly things were clearer. *The envy of others is one price of talent. It's one I'll have to pay.* With that realization came a surge of pity for Chris. How awful it must be. How empty.

"Mike, old boy, it gives me goose bumps to think of how many people must have envied you. Boy! Did you pay!" She spoke aloud in English, and the attendant gave her an odd look.

As she spoke, she thought of Chris's other words: "*You're too blind and stupid to be grateful.*" A little tremor of shock went through her when she admitted that that, too, was true. She'd never been grateful for being talented; she'd complained because she was driven. With that admission came another blunt fact. Without that drive, there was no talent. It was that simple.

Okay, Mike, she thought, you were so driven you had to have a perfect miniature painting in a fake drawer. They say genius is the infinite capacity to take pains. You were a genius. How driven you must have been! I wonder if you ever complained.

A nattily dressed man was looking up at the frescoes Michelangelo had painted of himself and the patrons who'd commissioned his work when Julie got to that room. The man nodded in her direction, and they both stared. This time, however, Julie didn't look at Michelangelo's face in the paintings. This time she studied the expressions he'd painted on the patrons' faces.

Here, in the privacy of his home, Michelangelo had painted his opinion. Some patrons wore greedy expressions, some looked kind, some bored. Michelangelo had known who was exploiting him and who wanted to help him.

"Ironical, isn't it?" the man said in English. "The ones who were using him for their own glorification are known now only because Michelangelo painted them." Julie nodded, and he went on. "I come here every time I'm in Florence. Keeps me humble."

Julie looked blank. He smiled faintly. "I have a gallery in London, quite a good one, actually. But I'm never sure. Will the artists whose work I show paint me as a benefactor or a greedy exploiter?" With that, he turned to the attendant and said in Italian, "I need several sets of prints. Can you sell them to me, please?" She nodded, and he followed her from the room.

Julie stared after him, thinking of Ethan. Was he an exploiter or a benefactor? What difference did it

make, anyway? Ethan, in his way, was as driven as she was, and they needed each other. It was that simple.

But what about Steve? The words pushed themselves forward from where she'd pushed all thoughts of Steve. That was not simple. Steve had asked nothing, had given everything—and she'd rejected it. Been afraid of feeling guilty. What was it he'd said? *"If it gives you satisfaction to wallow in guilt, go ahead and do it. Just don't expect me to stay around and applaud."* She shuddered, felt a rush of nausea when she understood what he meant.

In some strange, perverse way, it did give her satisfaction to wallow in guilt. Like poking the tongue in a cavity, she kept probing the sore spot of her guilt about her mother. She wouldn't let it heal, took a ridiculous, contrary pleasure in blaming herself.

"No more," she said aloud. "It's over. Done. My parents are dead. I'm alive. If I was wrong, I've paid for it." Her voice sounded loud in the empty room.

A great sob rose when she thought of Steve's gallant gesture yesterday morning. He hadn't stopped to count the cost. He hadn't worried about guilt or resentment. He'd thought only of her. He'd offered her a great gift. And she'd rejected it. As clearly as if she were standing there, Julie heard Elinor's soft voice saying, "Didn't your mother ever tell you that

being able to accept gifts gracefully is the mark of a lady?"

She didn't cry loudly, just made tiny, keening noises. She tried to see the irony in her timing, told herself there was bitter humor in it all. *I finally get the wisdom and understanding to accept and enjoy Steve's giving nature—and it's too late. Steve's gone.* She wanted to hide, creep into some corner and huddle there where no one could find her.

Instead, she stood beneath the frescoes and wept. Wept for poor Chris, trapped in envy, with no escape. Cried for her mother, who'd tried to understand and had never been able to. And she cried for herself and what she'd tossed away out of fear of guilt. Julie burrowed her face in the folds of the scarf Elinor had given her and wept even more as she recalled how it had felt to nuzzle in the soft wool of Steve's jacket.

He didn't even speak as he walked into the room. Just pulled her close and stroked her head like a father soothing a crying child. Oddly, she didn't even think it was strange, just leaned against his shoulder and cried, making silly burping noises into Steve's jacket.

"You sound like a percolator coffeepot," he said gruffly. She reached to run her finger along the line of his chin, touch the spot where his lower lip jutted out. Then she pulled his head down to hers and kissed him, letting all the love within her gush from her to

him. When they pulled apart, he started to speak. She held up her hand.

"No. Me first. I was wrong. Somehow we'll find a way. I'll do art restoration work until you can find a job. We'll find another gallery to show my work. We'll get someone to bring you stuff you need for research. Somehow we'll make it work. It's not fair. You give everything and I take it, but if that's how it has to be, we'll make it work. Please, Steve, will you marry me?"

His kiss answered better than words. When she spoke, her tone was thoughtful, almost awed. "Steve, I know now what Nora Hedinger meant. She said the capacity to love was a gift. Steve, I think you were born with that gift. I wasn't. But, with you, I'll learn. I'll—" She stopped short, pulled back to look at him. "It just hit me. What are you doing here? Your cleaning lady said you'd left town. I thought I'd never see you again."

"I was out of town. I came back. Your landlady said you were upset when you left. I figured you'd be here. So I came. Elementary, my dear Watson." He smiled as he said the last; then his expression became solemn. "And, yes, Julie, I'd be proud to marry you." Before she could reply, he grabbed her hand and pulled her to the door. "Come on, girl. We're holding up the wheels of progress, keeping folks waiting."

“Where are we going? Who’s waiting? Steve, have you done it again?”

“Done what?”

“Something rash and foolish. Like racing to get me when I was in Orvieto? Or what you did yesterday? Oh, Steve, what am I going to do with you?”

“Try to reform me, I guess. But do it later. Right now we’re in a hurry.” Half walking, half trotting, he pulled her behind him, forging a trail through the crowds on the sidewalk, striding across the bridge toward the hill on the other side. He moved ahead as they climbed the hill, taking long steps and not pausing to wait for her until he stood beneath the worn gray stones of the Florence Academy of Art.

Chapter Twelve

“*O*ne kiss for luck,” Steve said when Julie reached the doorway where he stood. He pulled her close in a quick, fierce embrace, then pushed the door open and waved her through. Their footsteps echoed on the stone floor of the old building. Julie had never been inside the Academy building before. She felt she should whisper or walk on tiptoe. Steve strode briskly to a door at the side and opened it without knocking. He beckoned her to follow him.

The room was huge, filled with ornate chairs and faded old sofas. At one end four men and a woman sat at a long, polished table. They looked up as Steve and Julie entered. Julie drew a sharp, startled breath when she recognized the woman. If Nora Hedinger recognized Julie, she gave no sign of it. She watched Julie and Steve as they approached, her face devoid of expression beneath the smooth white hair. Dr. Fermini sat beside her. His shaggy gray hair and heavy eyebrows seemed to merge with his beard. He bent his head slightly, acknowledging their presence. The other three men simply stared at them, waiting.

Suddenly Steve was the assured, confident instructor Julie had heard at the Casa Trilbi. His voice was clear—soft yet audible, his Italian clipped and precise. “First, thank you all for coming, especially on such short notice. I apologize for keeping you waiting.” He pushed Julie a step forward. “This is Julie Cramer, the student Dr. Fermini told you about. You’re all familiar with the problem that arose yesterday morning?” He paused; they all nodded.

He spoke more slowly when he went on. “Then you realize she is guilty only of a minor breach of security. As a student of the Academy, she will be working only on her own original work and thus will have no need for access to Institute treasures. Security will no longer be a problem.”

He paused again to look steadily at a round-faced man with a pencil-thin mustache who sat at the end of the table. Steve’s eyes moved from face to face and then to Julie; then he inhaled slowly. He sounded crisp and efficient when he went on. “The new term begins next Monday. She’s here to petition for dismissal of that minor charge against her.”

Julie felt a quick surge of pride when she looked at him; he looked stern, and his back was very straight. Unconsciously she pulled her own shoulders back and lifted her chin.

“Do any of you have any questions?” Steve asked. Fermini glanced at the others, then shook his head

and gestured toward a sofa under a window, out of hearing.

Sitting there, Julie had an absurd impulse to laugh. She kept thinking of a pair of truants waiting outside the principal's door. She wondered why she could not take this seriously. Why did it just seem ridiculous to her?

Steve took her hand to pull her up, but they were beckoned back to the table and he dropped it quickly. When Fermini spoke, he sounded angry, his gruff voice harsh and grating. "Sorry. The petition is denied."

Julie felt each word like a punch in the stomach. Instinctively she reached for Steve's hand. It wasn't there. He was bent over, digging through his briefcase.

"These are samples of her work," he said, taking out the sketch of the angry little boy she'd given him in Rome and the one on the back of the menu that she'd done in Fiesole. He held up the angry-boy sketch. "This one is signed. You see the name here?" Then he held up the other sketch. "This one was done yesterday, while I watched, so I can vouch for its authenticity. Both were done quickly, neither is a finished work, yet the talent is clear in both. True?"

"The talent is obvious. That is, however, not the issue in question. A fact you know well, Kerns." The

man's voice was small and tinny, not suited to his big body.

"I thought your decision would be what it is," Steve said smoothly, "so early this morning I went to Venice."

All four men looked up sharply when he named the city. Only Nora's face remained impassive.

Steve paused for a fraction of a second. "To the Academy there. I spoke with the directors there." Another brief pause. "I showed them these samples." He held up both sketches.

Julie found herself staring at Steve, too curious for the moment to even think of her disappointment. Steve's tone was casual, almost indifferent, as he went on. "I explained to them why the artist would very probably be denied acceptance here in Florence." A quick glance at the fat man with the mustache. "I also assured them that if this happened, the artist would apply for admission to the Venice Academy."

He did not wait to note the expressions on the men's faces, but bent again to burrow in his briefcase. He glanced up, caught Julie's eye, and winked. For a second he looked like an impudent ten-year-old. When he stood up, paper in hand, he was, once more, the assured, competent instructor. "This is a letter from the director of admissions at Venice, which promises her admission and agrees to match the

Foundation grant she had been awarded here in Florence.”

He handed the letter to Fermini, who glanced at it and passed it to Nora. Suddenly Steve was casual, his hands stuffed in his pockets, his voice confidential. “Since her work has already sold and her talent is obvious, the directors in Venice are eager for the prestige she’s likely to bring.” He smiled briefly. “When that happens, of course, they will be quick to point out that the Florence Academy failed to appreciate early talent.”

Julie clamped her mouth tight. She didn’t trust herself to look at Steve, so she looked at Nora Hedinger. She thought she saw Nora’s mouth twitch, but the movement was so slight, Julie wasn’t sure.

“Perhaps we should discuss this further,” the fat man said, picking up the letter.

Fermini waved Julie and Steve back to the sofa.

The wait was longer this time. Steve reached for Julie’s hand and smiled at her, his face alight with happiness, his eyes two bright slits in his craggy face. She closed her eyes. She couldn’t think when she was looking at Steve, and suddenly she had to think. Catch some idea that kept eluding her. Somehow she’d missed something important. It was there, hovering at the edge of her mind, if she could only reach it. She felt she’d let something escape her, something

that mattered not just now, but forever. It was there, tantalizing her, just beyond her grasp.

She was almost annoyed when Steve took her hand to lead her back to the table. Whatever that thought was, it was gone now. Fermini spoke again, same gruff voice, but no anger this time. "The consensus is that she be accepted under the full grant from the Foundation. Congratulations, both of you." He leaned forward to shake their hands, and his sleeve pushed the menu-card sketch to the floor.

Julie bent to pick it up, looked at it. Suddenly that elusive thought she'd been unable to grasp came—sharp and clear.

Steve planned this. He knew all along what would happen. Yesterday, at the restaurant! That's why he wouldn't let me give the sketch away. He said, "I want to hang it above my desk." What desk? He knew he didn't even have a job. And last night? When he said he wouldn't stay around to watch? He was already planning to go to Venice. That's what he meant. And I was so busy worrying about my broken heart, I never thought about him.

And today? All the while I was feeling sorry for myself. While I was carrying on because I trusted Chris and she let me down. While I was telling myself how noble I was to say no to Steve. All I was thinking of was me! Just me and how I felt! And all that time Steve was knocking himself out to help me. That's all

he thought of! I wallowed in self-pity. He thought about me.

Her voice surprised her. It was loud. Her words surprised her even more. "This whole thing is a farce!" She grinned at the gasps, enjoying the consternation. Even Nora Hedinger looked astonished. Julie took a deep breath, wondering herself what she was going to say. Again her words surprised her.

"You all know as well as I do that there's no truth to his"—she pointed at Steve—"story about spending that night with me. He made that up. And you know it. You may be willing to sit there and watch a valuable member of this Academy get dumped because of a lie, but I'm not. I didn't take that painting. You know that. And Stephen Kerns never saw me that night. We're getting married. And either he stays here, too, or you can take your grant and your Academy and—" She stopped when Nora Hedinger caught her eye.

The silence was almost palpable. Julie didn't look at Steve. She wondered why she wasn't even shaking. She felt sure, content, unafraid, proud. Loving Steve had made all those feelings possible. *He gave me that too, she thought, and for the rest of my life all I have to do is help that love grow.*

Then, shyly, she looked up at Steve; his eyes were shiny. Very softly he whispered, "Your eyes are very yellow right now."

Everyone looked at Nora when she spoke. Her Italian was smooth, polished, like her cultured voice. "Gentlemen, I believe we have been reprimanded." She looked from side to side, half smiling. "Will one of you be good enough to explain just what she is talking about?"

All four men talked at once. She leaned her chin on her hand and waited. Fermini stood up, glaring behind his grizzled beard. In a hoarse, rasping voice he meticulously listed the Academy rules banning marriage or relationships between instructors or between instructors and students and ended by saying, "And so, as executive director of the Academy, the rules demand that I insist upon Kerns's resignation immediately." As he sat down, he wearily added, "Much as I regret having to do it."

Nora's tone was casual, relaxed. "She does have a point. This Academy does seem 'hung up'—isn't that the phrase they use?—on rules." She paused, looked at each man one by one. No one spoke. Her lips curved in a tiny smile at the corners of her mouth, and she glanced at Steve and Julie standing, hand in hand, before the table.

"Dr. Costa," she said gently to the fat man, "as comptroller, could you tell me what percentage of the Academy's annual budget comes from the Foundation?"

"About thirty percent generally. This year it has

been slightly more than usual, due to the extra grant for computer hardware in the research section.” Costa did not have a ledger book in front of him, but he sounded as if he were reading figures from one.

“Thank you, Dr. Costa. I hope the computers prove useful.” She smiled, like a duchess acknowledging the report of the manor steward, then picked up a pen that lay in front of her. She toyed with it for a few seconds, while everyone stared at her, waiting. Nora seemed to enjoy their attention. The pen made a little click when she let it go, and they all jumped.

“Gentlemen,” she said, “when my father set up the Foundation, he made no specific regulations on how the funds were to be distributed. He left that in the hands of the Foundation director.” She was quiet for a second and lifted her hands in a helpless, feminine gesture. “Of course, I have no authority over Academy rules. That is in your hands.” She paused to give each of the four men a quick, sweet smile, lingering a second longer on Fermini.

Her voice still had its sweet, helpless, feminine tone when she went on. “But as current director of the Foundation, I do have some financial control over how the funds are distributed. I do believe that unless there are some revisions of policy and a subsequent reinstatement of Mr. Kerns here, I shall have to recommend the Foundation make its grants elsewhere.”

From her friendly tone she might have been discussing which flavor of ice cream she preferred.

No silence followed this speech. They all talked at once. Costa jumped up and trotted to where Nora sat. He leaned down to look directly at her face. She seemed to enjoy the confusion. She allowed it to go on for several minutes. Then she stood up. Her voice was no longer gentle or sweet. "I shall expect copies of revisions and affirmation of Mr. Kerns's employment at my hotel by tomorrow evening."

With smooth, practiced movements she tossed her mink coat around her shoulders, picked up her purse and attaché case, and made her imperious way across the room. Like trained courtiers, Steve and Julie followed in her wake.

At the door Nora turned to look back at the four still at the table. "Congratulations, gentlemen. Now I understand why the Academy is so highly regarded. It is the ability of the directors to attract and keep talented people. These two are a credit to both the Academy and the Foundation."

She swept through the door, and Steve quietly pulled it shut behind the three of them.

"Julie, my dear, I'm proud of you. Not surprised, of course. It was inevitable. How nice to see you again!" Nora brushed her cheek against Julie's. Then she straightened and said briskly, "Obviously, Julie, you know the thief's identity. Please give me her

name and address." She handed Julie a tiny leather notebook and a heavy gold pen and continued before Julie could speak. "I'll have my lawyers talk to her lawyers and get the matter settled. Loyalty is all very well, but the matter must be attended to—and quickly."

Julie started to protest, then stopped when she realized that Nora was right. While Julie wrote, Nora turned to Steve. "You did a ridiculous thing. Of course, you know that."

"I know," he murmured, "stupid of me. Didn't seem that way at the time. You didn't see her then. I did." He sounded slightly defiant as he said the last.

"Gallantry may be charming, but it is illogical," Nora answered with a sigh.

"How come you're here? Who called you? I don't get it. You never mentioned you knew Fermini when we talked in Rome. How come you just happen to be here?" Julie asked Nora as she returned the notebook and pen.

"Dr. Fermini called me. He always does when I'm here in Florence. Usually I don't attend directors' meetings. Today, however, when he told me the name of the student in question, I decided to sit in on the session." She smiled and patted Steve's hand. "Must say it was livelier than most of them." She gave Steve a shrewd look. "You asked him to call the meeting, didn't you?" She didn't wait for an answer. "You

called him last night, when you decided to go to Venice today." She smiled and added, "What a sly, sneaky maneuver!"

For a second Julie thought Nora was going to slap him on the back. She didn't, merely tapped his hand lightly and said, "Amazing! As devious as you are foolish. What a marvelous combination!"

Nora's laughter was infectious. The three stood in the dim light of the ancient room, clinging to each other in helpless waves of laughter. The sound echoed against the old stone walls and bounced back as if the ghosts of people who'd been there before were laughing too.

Then Nora said, "Surely you must know some spot for dinner. Behaving like a tyrant gives me a voracious appetite."

She didn't wait for a reply, just turned and headed for the door. Her high heels clicked on the stones, and Steve scurried to open the door.

The restaurant they went to was just off the Ponte Vecchio, an original medieval building with two-foot thick walls and tapestries, lit only by the blaze in the huge fireplace. They sat silent for a moment, their faces glowing pink, the flames casting ever-changing shadows on the old wall. It was strange. Julie had been bursting with questions; now she only wanted to sit in this lovely, age-old room and revel in an unf-

miliar sense of contentment, a strange serenity she'd never known before.

Oddly, the feeling had nothing to do with their readmission to the Academy. That was another world, an important one, to be sure, but not the basis of this sense of satisfaction. Tonight, for what seemed to Julie the first time in her life, she felt sure, unafraid. Loving Steve had made that possible. She leaned back to watch Nora and Steve, their heads huddled over the menu.

Nora glanced up. "Well, what about you, Julie? What do you want?"

Her answer surprised them all, especially Julie. "I want to paint you—in light just like this. May I?" Their laughter echoed in the old room, and other diners turned to stare briefly. Julie felt Steve's eyes and turned toward him. For a second she could see her face reflected in his eyes, and she hoped he saw his face reflected in hers. "I'll have whatever you're having," she said softly.

The waiter appeared with wine then, and they raised their glasses. Automatically Steve and Julie looked toward Nora. "To you two. I'm so happy for you." She took a long sip of wine before she continued. "Steve, why didn't you tell me about the problem when you came to see me in Rome? If Julie hadn't dropped her little bombshell, I never would have known." She took another sip.

He looked embarrassed. When he answered, his voice sounded young, vulnerable, a far cry from the competent instructor who'd spoken to the board members. "I have to admit I thought of it. I recognized your name when Julie told me about meeting you. I intended to tell you. That's why I came. Then when I met you, I couldn't do it. Couldn't trade on your friendship with Julie. Couldn't *use* you. Dumb, I guess. Doing the logical thing has never been one of my characteristics." He gave her a rueful grin.

"Gallantry is rarely logical," Nora murmured as she turned to Julie. "And you, my dear, as I said, I'm proud of you, but what made you do it?"

"I don't know. I didn't know what I was going to say until I heard it myself. I had no idea it would feel so good." She felt the warm strength in Steve's hand when he squeezed hers beneath the table, felt the electric energy of his gentle touch, felt a surge of joy like a current within her.

She paused a second; when she continued, her voice was a purr. "I guess love is like gallantry. It's rarely logical."

BADGE OF LOVE

Jane McBride Choate

Kathleen O'Rourke's world was shattered when a drunk driver killed her brother several months ago, leaving her without a family. Since then her life has been shadowed by grief and anger. Unable to face her loss, she buries her feelings and instead concentrates on completing her brother's term as sheriff of their small hometown. Her composure is shaken one day, however, when a remorseless drunk motorist is brought to the station.

Kathleen intends to keep Scott Hobart in jail until his trial, and when his older brother, Kyle, shows up to arrange for his release, sparks fly between him and Kathleen. When Kyle later asks her out, Kathleen is sure he is using her to get Scott freed, but he turns out to be gentle and honorable—the kind of man she can picture spending the rest of her life with. As their relationship deepens, Kathleen's painful memories begin to fade—until she discovers that Scott has been set free! How could she have been so mistaken about Kyle? And how can she face her future, having already lost so much?

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